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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MAR 11 1957

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Blood Runs Red When Hatfield Hits The Outlaw Trail

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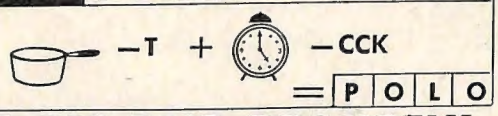
SAMPLE PUZZLE

The Correct Answer Is ONE Of These Names of Fame!

☐ Marco Polo ☐ Betsy Ross ☐ Genghis Khan ☐ Frank Buck



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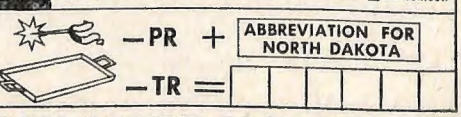

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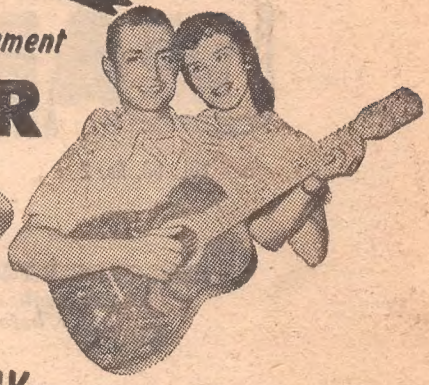

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 66, No. 2 APRIL, 1957

A Jim Hatfield Novel

RENEGADE RANGER.....Jackson Cole 12
The stakes were high, and Hatfield risked his neck as never before in acting as bait for Texas' worst outlaw

A Novelet

THE RELUCTANT GUN.....J. M. Decker 76
Dave Morgan was his name, and somewhere in his past he had grown sick of violence, yet he was still a fighter

Four Short Stories

THE LONG DAY.....Philip Morgan 58
Though it wasn't his battle, he just couldn't walk out

SIXGUN PROMISE.....W. J. Reynolds 66
Ira Irby was tough, but the gunman figured to take him

THE KILLER LAUGHED.....L. D. Geumlek 96
The boy, Lukey, idolized Walt—and both paid for it

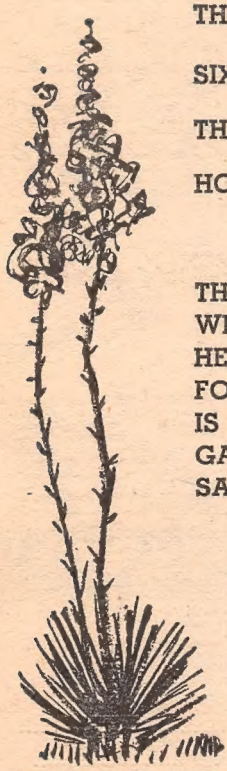
HOSTAGE TRAIL.....Fred Grove 103
The captain couldn't be bluffed, but he could be dead

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 10
HEADSTRONG.....Jack Kytle 25
FOOD FOR THOUGHT.....Al Spong 41
IS THE COUGAR KING?.....Ferris Weddle 94
GAMBLERS ON WHEELS.....Bob and Jan Young 100
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 114

Also See Cartoons on Pages 37 and 45

JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor



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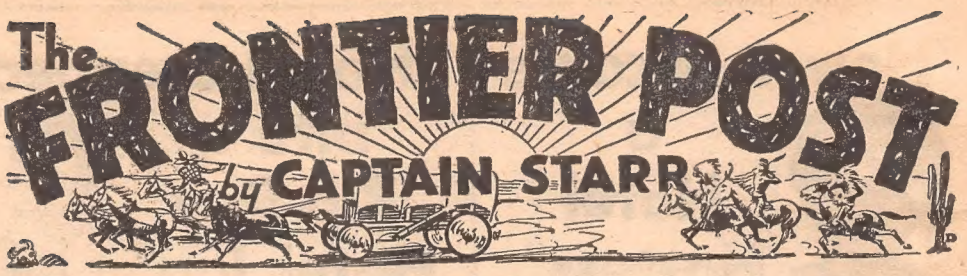

THE CALAMITY THAT WAS JANE

ONE DAY in the spring of 1875 an Army unit, on an expedition against the Sioux Indians, was marching across the dusty plains of Wyoming when it came to a river. The bullwhackers accompanying the outfit decided to get off their hot wagon seats and enjoy a swim.

Almost instantly there was consternation. A horrified young officer who'd come upon the scene went dashing off to tell his commanding officer.

No, the Indians weren't about to attack. And the horses and wagons that the bullwhackers had left behind were all right. It was just that one of the naked bullwhackers in the river didn't look like any of the others—and for good reason. It was a woman!

Now if this scene was ever portrayed in the movies, the girl—shown at a fairly discreet angle, of course—would turn out to be someone who looked like Jean Arthur, or Jane Russell, or maybe Barbara Stanwyck. That's the way Calamity Jane always looks in the movies.

Wild and Wooly

In real life, however, she wasn't as pretty as Jean, or Jane, or Barbara, but she undoubtedly was tougher than all three put together, and you could probably throw in Shelley Winters and Sheree North, too. Calamity was more the battle-ax type. Much more.

Maybe it is just as well that the movies never have anyone who looks like Calamity playing her, because they could never put the real Calamity on the screen, anyhow. They wouldn't dare, for the real Calamity Jane was as wild and wooly as they came.

There are persistent stories that, dressed up in men's clothes, she served as a scout as well as a bullwhacking teamster for the Army. She even fought in some of its skirmishes. It is said that she would have been with General Custer and his men when they were massacred if she hadn't caught pneumonia a few days before while crossing a cold river as the general's courier.

She also worked, in the course of events, as a muleskinner and a railroad hand. She drank like a man—two men, really. She could cuss a blue streak that is said to have turned cowpunchers pure green with envy. As for morals—well, Calamity never heard of Hollywood's censorship office.

Frail Husbands

There are any number of versions as to how Martha Jane Canary got her going name. One was that she married a good dozen times and each and every one of her husbands wound up very prematurely dead in one form or another. The story that Calamity herself told about it went as follows:

She was taking part in a campaign with the Army out of Fort Saunders, riding alongside one Captain Pat Egan in a drive against an Indian stronghold, when a bunch of howling savages suddenly loomed out of seemingly nowhere and rode straight at the captain. She whirled in their direction and began firing away. She not only brought momentary confusion to the redskin ranks but her quick and brave action enabled her

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

and the captain to escape, dashing away across the horizon midst a shower of arrows.

Later, Captain Egan told her gratefully, "You're wonderful to have around in time of calamity. From now on I'm going to call you Calamity Jane.

Some other versions of how she got her name, not told by Jane herself, take a somewhat different tack. They indicate the descriptive term was placed before her name, because wherever she was there was apt to be trouble in large doses.

There is, however, no evidence that she married a dozen times—or even one, for that matter. It seems pretty clear that she really had only one great crush on someone in her life, and that was the dashing Wild Bill Hickok. Their paths did cross, that much is known for sure, and they were seen in each other's company, but the indications seemed pretty plain that he was more amused than anything else by the untamed hoydenish character who tagged along after him. Wild Bill, for all his card-playing, hard-riding ways, seemed to remain steadfastly loyal to his wife.

Kind of Heart

There are many stories told about Calamity Jane. Legends seem to bounce about her name like tumbleweeds. But there are three things that can be said about her for sure—she fought hard, drank too much and caroused too much.

Yet she did have a wonderfully kind heart—in her own way. She had a habit of referring to children as "little bastards," but she would go out of her way to befriend them. The only known arrest against her was when she rolled a drunken miner in Deadwood—her favorite stomping grounds—of his money. She admitted this forthrightly to the judge.

"Damn right I did!" she declared. "I wanted the money to go to the hospital to pay the bill for Kitty Arnold who has been sick."

Although wracked with rheumatic pains herself, she got out of her sick bed every day to carry a basket of fruit to an ailing frontier friend. When Deadwood was smitten with the dread smallpox plague, Calamity Jane became its ministering angel, and not only in a purely nursing capacity. Striding into a general store, gun in hand, she would take all the groceries she wanted and explain that the money would be paid when the people were on their feet again and able to do so.

She wound up a decrepit old woman, bedraggled and haglike, her long drinking bouts and general irascibility growing progressively worse. And yet the end was not without a certain Hollywoodish touch.

Almost a Lady

On her deathbed, her only request was that she be buried "next to Bill"—Wild Bill Hickok, the only man she ever really loved—and this was done. They lie buried side by side in Mt. Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood. And the preacher who delivered her funeral oration on that summer day in 1903 was a youngster whom Calamity Jane had diligently nursed back to health during the town's dreadful smallpox plague.

Of all the stories about Calamity Jane, though, maybe the most characteristic of her had to do with the time a legitimate play, East Lynne, opened in Deadwood. It was the first time the theater had come to Deadwood, and it was quite an occasion for the town. The ladies showed up in their finest for the performance.

Calamity Jane had on her niftiest outfit too—a corduroy suit, long green gloves and a pure white sombrero.

Settling back in a front seat, she took out a plug of tobacco, bit off a big chunk of it and began chewing away as she watched the action on the stage.

During the first act, except for the moving jaws, Calamity was just about the perfect lady. But when Lady Isobel perversely ran off with Sir Francis, Calamity felt the time for action had come. As Lady Isobel, wearing an elegant evening gown, strode imperiously across the stage, Calamity pursed her lips, took dead aim and let go with a stream of amber tobacco juice that caught the magnificent gown where it fit the most.

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The difference between a big Texas ranch and a small one these days is that, on a small one, it takes only a local phone call to the bunkhouse. Leastwise, that's what a Texan told us.

Billy The Kid was born in Brooklyn and became perhaps the most notorious killer in the West, whereas William MacLeod Raine, one of the most celebrated writers of Western stories, was born in London. It's like we always say—you never can tell which way a pickle will squirt.

It says here that in Arizona there are ice caverns in which ice may be found six feet below the surface even during the hottest months of the year. Having been down Yuma way one summer, we can only say that this, brother, must be the most durable ice on record!

The Pueblo Indians raised turkeys only for the feathers they provided for their hairdresses. Seems as if we get feather and feather from the truth with these items—except we don't, oddly enough.

Capitalizing on the fact that huge prehistoric animals roamed their countryside millions of years ago, merchants of Vernal, Utah, issue Dinosaur hunting licenses to visiting sportsmen. For bucks only, we presume. You can shoot the bull, but no dough, please—except on the barrelhead.

John Selman, the El Paso deputy constable who finally shot and killed John Wesley Hardin, was arrested by his own son, the chief deputy, for the shooting. But, since Hardin had been a very bad badman who had killed some forty-four men, a grand jury acquitted the elder Selman. It served him right.

The world's largest cactus gardens are located at Edinburg—in Texas, natch—and claim to ship as many as 5000 cactus plants a day. Which ain't hay.

It seems that ranchers are still a tough bunch. Thrown from a horse near Dickinson, North Dakota, Rancher Don Hafeled broke his neck, yet got up and walked a quarter of a mile to his home.

Even the radishes grow big in Texas. Around Sulphur Springs, radishes weighing fifteen pounds are a common sight. The cattle enjoy eating the giant vegetable and they munch the tops, too. Tops, schmops, it's all the same to Texas cows.

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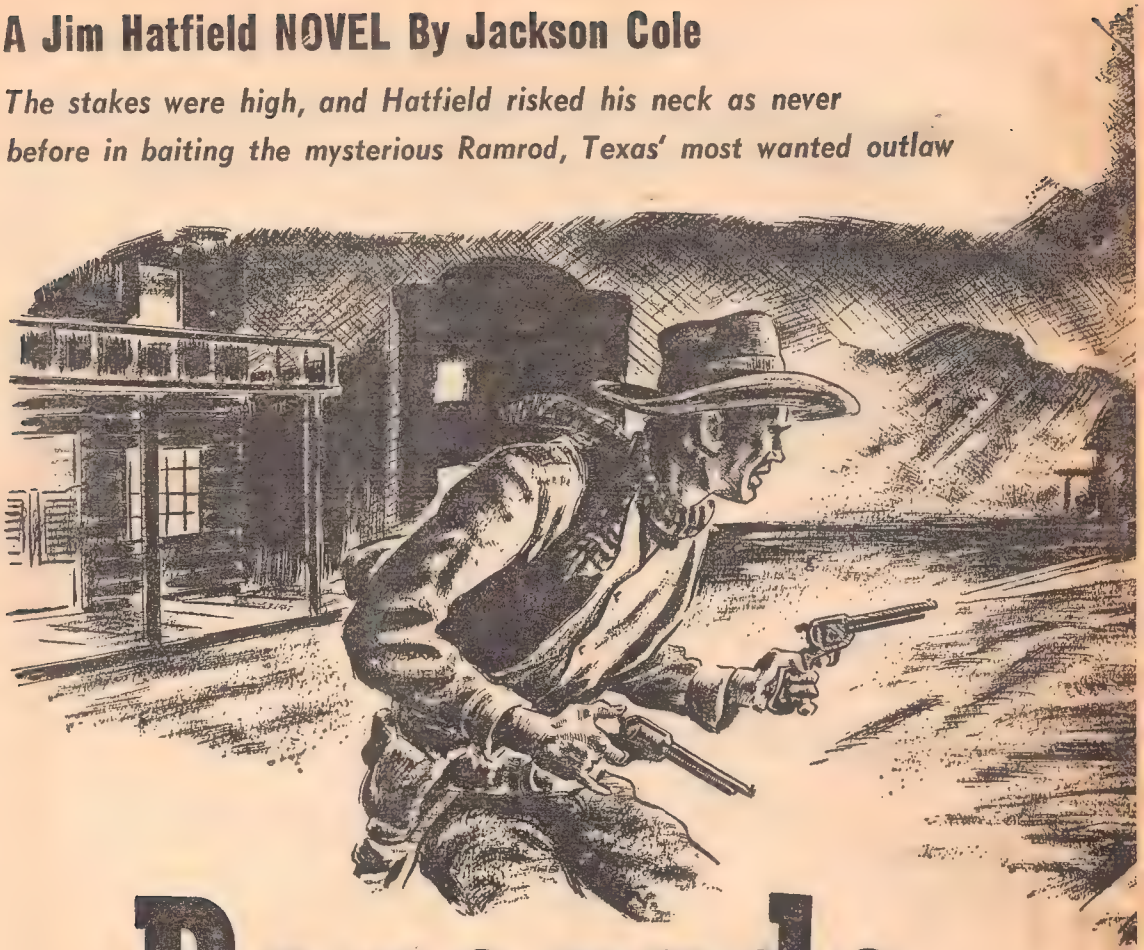
A Jim Hatfield NOVEL By Jackson Cole

The stakes were high, and Hatfield risked his neck as never before in baiting the mysterious Ramrod, Texas' most wanted outlaw



Renegade Ranger

CHAPTER I

Red River Hideout

IT HAD been ten days since Brandy Boone had led his renegade band up from the Rio Grande to this dank cavern hidden behind the brush and tules on the south bank of the Red River.

They had made the traverse of Texas—five men, ten saddle horses, and two pack-mules laden with grub and ammunition—in what they believed had been absolute secrecy, so far as the law was concerned. Riding by night, holing up by day, they had scrupulously avoided cowtowns and ranches and main traveled roads en route.

Knowing they rode with death at their stirrups, for Brandy Boone and his wild bunch rated high on the wanted list of Texas bad men, the five had almost enjoyed the trek north. But here on the Red, hiding out like animals, counting the slow dragging hours and days, the strain was getting almost intolerable. Especially with Boone away, keeping a rendezvous with the owlhoot king known only as "The Ramrod," over in Tascosa. Boone's return was already four days overdue.

An hour before the tenth sundown sent its shadows crawling along the riverbottoms, Karl Kesselring disobeyed Boone's strict orders by abandoning his guard post on the bank outside, to come groping back into the cavern.

Kesselring was a big mean-looking hulk of a man, who toted notched guns and boasted of an infamous past. Leaning his rifle against the sloping wall of the grotto, he yelled out his challenge to the others back in the murk.

"I got to have myself a smoke or go loco out there. Anybody want to make anything of it, me leavin' my lookout duty?"

He got no answer.

Spoiling for a fight, anything to relieve the singing tension of his nerves, Kesselring glowered down at white-haired old Chihuahua Charlie, the cook. The *cocinero* sat Turk-legged on a blanket, facing the thin glow of westering sunrays which filtered through the willows at the cavern mouth. For hours the old Mexican had been whetting his bowie knife on an oilstone cupped in the hollow of one palm, fining down the edge with figure-eight rubbings on the sole of his cowboot. Charlie was Kesselring's pet hate, and always had been.

"Damn your greasy hide, Chihuahua!" Kesselring burst out. "Quit that confounded eternal stroppin'. Whose back you sharpenin' that sticker for, as if I had to ask."

The old peon cuffed back his sisal sombrero from damp brows. His jet-black eyes shifted to see how his *compañeros* had reacted. They were all gringos, but unlike Karl, friendly to him. Naco Red, the lanky outlaw Boone had designated as his second in command, was on his bedroll, stolidly patient. The oldster called Pecos Kid, little more than a pair of glinting eye-whites and the coal of a *cigarillo* in his lips. And in the background, nearest the roped-off enclosure for the horses, the newcomer to Boone's wild bunch, ruggedly handsome, lean, taciturn: red-headed Slim Hannigan.

"I use thees *cuchillo* to sleet my own throat," Chihuahua threatened sullenly, "eef Brandy he's not comin' back pronto. I go crazee een the *cabeza*, cooped up lak' thees, it is the truth."

Naco Red propped himself up and barked a warning: "*Bastante!* Enough of that kind of talk. Put away the knife, Charlie. Karl, stop needlin' the old one. Simmer down."

Chihuahua Charlie shrugged, sheathing his weapon. They were all edgy, taut as over-wound clocks, poised like wolves ready to fly at each other's throats at the drop of a harsh word. Men got that way, cooped up so long.

Ten days? It seemed more like ten months since Brandy Boone had ridden out to keep his tryst with the Lone Star State's most elusive outlaw, the mysterious El Jefe to the Mexicans, called only "The Ramrod" north of the border. The Ramrod had some kind of a deal cooking for them up here in northern Texas.

On Boone's express orders, they had kept out of sight daytimes, swapping turns at lookout duty around the clock. Of nights they would exercise the horses under the stars, or swim in the Red's tepid waters to work the kinks out of their muscles. For men used to violent action, holing up like moles was torture.

The only one of the five who had yet

to bare his teeth or tongue-lash anyone was Slim Hannigan, but he was hardly in a position to get ringy. Even though he had come to them with The Ramrod's personal recommendation, he had not yet been accepted. Slim Hannigan was still a question mark, a gunhand on probation.

HAVING failed to bait Charlie into a quarrel to vent his pent-up tensions, Kesselring hunkered down beside his saddlebags, searching for the tin can in which he kept his bale of tightly-pressed Cuban stogies.

"Something's gone wrong," Kesselring declared. "Brandy said he'd be back in six days. Maybe he run afoul of a posse or something. I say we ought to head back for the Rio Grande country where we belong, and to hell with The Ramrod and the big plans he has for us."

Naco Red had had enough. He reared to a sitting position on his blankets and called out angrily, "You're supposed to be on guard duty this shift, Karl. Get your cigar and get back on the job where you belong."

Taking his time, Kesselring stuck a cigar between his teeth and began hunting for a block of lucifer matches cached somewhere in his *alforja* pouches. Slim Hannigan rose that moment to speak softly from the darkness.

"It is not my place to dish out advice, being new here. But if you're serious about keeping a guard over this rat hole, you're overlooking a detail that could easily cost us our skins."

The men stiffened. Kesselring had frozen in the act of lighting a match for his stogie. Naco Red's attention shifted away from the rebellious Kesselring, and he turned on Hannigan.

With Boone away, the only thing that held this lawless group together was the fact that each of its members was on the dodge, a fact which served to cement them together for common protection. Mutual distrust kept them in equilibrium. A man would not dare betray one of his saddle mates to the law to collect the reward he was packing, for the informer himself might be toting a bounty likewise.

JIM HATFIELD

"It would seem our ex-convict friend likes to boss things," said Kesselring, with elaborate politeness. "Nobody knows who The Ramrod is. Maybe Slim is The Ramrod, incognito. Eh?"

All eyes were focussed on Slim Hannigan now. As Kesselring struck a match to light his cheroot, they could see the set fixture to Slim's jaw, the anger kindled by Kesselring's scorn.

He was big and tough and bony, this Hannigan hombre, as brown as a Mexican from wind and weather, but his hair was a flaming red, Irish rather than Latin. At

thirty-odd, Hannigan had lived plenty, it seemed. Not only had he come to Brandy Boone with personal credentials from the mysterious Ramrod himself, but papers which proved that Slim Hannigan had spent the past four years serving for manslaughter in the Texas Prison for Incorrigibles—the infamous "T.P.I." at San Castro, on the Brazos.

That last had been enough to make Boone accept Hannigan without question. In all the history of the San Castro prison the only jailbreak ever pulled off there had been engineered by Brandy—short for Brandywine—Boone. With him in the getaway, had been two other lifers, Kesselring and the Pecos Kid; these three had formed the nucleus of Boone's outlaw band.

Women regarded Slim Hannigan as a handsome specimen of manhood. He stood over six feet and scaled a solid one eighty. His cowboy background accounted for saddle-warped legs and callus tissue padding his hands, caused by lass' ropes and kept there during the prison years by hickory pick handles.

Hannigan had yet to justify his reputation as a gunslinger, but The Ramrod, in his letter to Boone, had testified that Slim's gun savvy would make him a useful addition to the gang.

"You were sayin', Slim?" questioned Naco Red, the scar-faced, russet-haired second in command. "You don't like the way we're postin' a lookout?"

Slim Hannigan came to his feet, flexing his stiff joints. His flat-crowned stetson brushed the thick festooning cobwebs, which hung like gauze from the shale roof of the cave, bringing down a little sift of fine dust which eddied and bloomed in the match light before Kesselring got his cigar going.

"This cave is probably safe as a grave," Slim Hannigan said. His voice had a deep, resonant quality here in the grotto. "Like you pointed out yesterday when Chihuahua Charlie got to gripin', we're ten miles from the nearest ranch, twenty miles off the nearest cattle crossin' trail. But if I remember correct, Brandy give orders before he left to maintain a twenty-four hour guard. Right?"

Naco Red said coldly, "We're probably the most wanted men in the Lone Star State, Slim. Maybe you ain't, seein' as how you just got out of the penitentiary, but the rest of us got our hides to think about."

Hannigan grinned bleakly. "My joinin' up with Boone nullifies whatever protection I built up for myself those years I spent at San Castro hoosegow. What I'm leadin' up to is this; men in our situation, hidin' out by day and getting our exercise by night, we've got to watch the small details or we're liable to find this cave turned from a refuge into a trap. We haven't got a rear exit, remember."

Naco Red, who was jealous of his authority as second in command to big Brandy Boone, snapped testily, "We've maintained a twenty-four-hour guard out on the bank, you know damn well. What little detail have I overlooked that could cause us grief?"

Hannigan gestured toward Kesselring, whose cigar smoke was eddying in milky layers under the grotto ceiling.

"Those stogies Karl smokes. The other night, taking the remuda over to the river to drink, Karl was standing guard. From three hundred feet away, and no wind stirrin', I could smell that cigar. What if I had been a sheriff on the prowl?"

KESSELRING hitched the double gun belts at his hips. Since Hannigan had joined the gang he had been unable to needle the red-head into a quarrel, but he saw a chance now.

"You remind me of a shavetail I soldiered under once," Kesselring said, thumbing one of the crossed-saber insignia brass buttons on his blue army shirt. Those buttons were the outlaw's one vanity, keeping them shined up. "He got me restricted to the post for smokin' on guard duty. I told him to go to hell, and lost my stripes for sassin' an officer."

Kesselring's chest swelled to a deep intake of breath and his eyes snapped wickedly as he grinned at Hannigan.

"But you, Slim, ain't no lientenant and I ain't no sargent. This ain't the U. S. Cavalry—I got no stripes to lose for smokin' when an' where I please. I say you can go to blazes—"

Naco Red came to his feet, sensing the wildness that was rising in frenzied crescendo in Kesselring's voice. The big fellow was goading Hannigan into a brawl, just to relieve the monotony.

"Hold on a minute, Karl!" The *segundo* silenced Kesselring. "I been thinkin'. Slim's got a point. Supposin' one of us was a range rider, huntin' strays. And out of the middle o' nothin', smelt cigar smoke. He'd come investigatin' faster'n the devil could fry a horse thief."

The Pecos Kid snorted derisively, "And he'd play hell reportin' that he'd located a cave with five-six owlhooters hidin' out in it, too. Time he'd located who was smokin' the stogie, he'd be dead, catfish bait in the river."

But Slim's warning was still working on Naco Red's mind.

"So this range rider would be dead," the red-headed *segundo* said soberly. "His horse might drift back to the home corral with an empty saddle, or might not get back at all. Riders would come out hunting the missing man—and we would be in deep trouble. *Si?*"

Kesselring picked up his .30-30 Winchester where he had leaned it against the side of the cavern wall and was making his way back toward the dim half-circle of daylight marking the mouth of their hideout. His cheroot was trailing a long wavy rope of gray smoke behind him.

"Karl!"

Naco's sharp voice was the loudest sound these men's ears had heard in the ten days and nights they had been forting up in this hole in the ground. It brought Kesselring to an abrupt halt, his shoulders hunching up as if he had been struck a blow in the back.

He turned very slowly to face the others, the Winchester hanging loose at the end of his right arm. Naco Red said quietly,

"Karl, pinch out the stogie. No smokin' on guard duty. That order is official, savvy, until Brandy gets back to countermand it."

Slowly and deliberately, Karl Kesselring picked the cigar out of his teeth and stood staring at its fuming tip. Knots of muscle played at the hinges of his jaws; the men could see the sudden rime of sweat-beads bursting from his pores, the man's convulsive tightening of his grip on his rifle.

Naco Red felt a sharp stab of concern go through him. He knew Kesselring's berserk temper only too well, having served on a few occasions as the butt of Kesselring's ire. He knew and sympathized with the pressures which had brought Kesselring to his present state of nerves, but he knew if things got out of hand he would have to shoot Kesselring. All the long planning which had brought them up here from their haunts on the Rio Grande would go up in smoke if he allowed Kesselring to get out of control.

Kesselring jabbed the cigar back in his teeth and bent a hateful glare at the red-headed newcomer, Slim Hannigan—the man responsible for cheating him out of a cigar.

"I'll take no more from you, hear me?" he panted hotly. "Just because your Dad was a compadre of The Ramrod's, Slim, don't think you can come pawin' and bellerin' around making like the bull of the herd. You want to make a fight of it, goddamn you, go ahead."

Slim Hannigan said very softly, "Not now. Later, maybe, but not now, Kesselring."

Kesselring shrugged his big shoulders and made a snorting sound through his lips, whether in relief at having run his bluff without causing an actual showdown, or in disappointment for Slim's sidestepping physical combat, none could say.

"You're my relief out there on the mud bank," Kesselring growled finally, his eyes drilling through the murk at Slim. "Maybe we can have it out between us when you come out."

Naco Red opened his mouth, intending to warn Kesselring that he would stand

to answer to Boone when the boss returned, when events got suddenly out of hand, quite unexpectedly and more or less by accident.

THE accident was old Chihuahua Charlie, who still sat cross-legged on his blanket almost at Kesselring's feet. Unaware of the old Mexican's presence, Kesselring wheeled with the intention of striding out of the cavern to return to his lookout post on the upper bank—and sprawled head-first into the rubble. His spurs tangled in the *cociñero's* gay colored serape and he lost his grip on the carbine.

Bawling an obscene oath, Kesselring leaped to his feet, spun, and lashed out a kick which caught the wrinkled old Mexican a glancing lick across the jawbone. Chihuahua Charlie somersaulted backwards, tangled in his serape, and emitted a scream of mingled pain and fury as he regained his balance and came to his feet to face Kesselring.

"After this keep out of my way, you mangey old *cabrone!*" Kesselring shouted, turning to snatch up his Winchester.

Chihuahua Charlie shrieked back a Mexican malediction which cast aspersions on Kesselring's immediate ancestry. And that was the spark which brought the explosion.

Jerking up the Winchester, Kesselring aimed it point-blank at Chihuahua Charlie, the crotch of his right thumb cranking the lever to shove a shell into the breech for a shot. And in that split instant, before Naco Red could haul his .45 from leather, before Chihuahua Charlie could blink an eye, the slim figure of young Hannigan came charging from the shadows to dive at Kesselring from knee height.

Kesselring's rifle thundered, but the slug was wide of the old Mexican as he went backwards, Hannigan on top of him, following his flying tackle with a smash to the jaw. Kesselring's rifle escaped his grasp in the next moment, but the big outlaw's left hand produced a bowie knife—seemingly out of nowhere—and drew the razor-honed blade upward across Hannigan's back from kidneys to shoulder.

It was a shallow cut, drawing blood but failing to part muscle or nick bone. Before Kesselring could get the knife into position for another stabbing thrust at his adversary's back, Hannigan's locking grip paralyzed Kesselring's knife hand at the wrist and he was smashing short blows into Kesselring's face with his clubbing right.

His shoulders lifting and falling like the walking beam of a steam engine, while blood from the long gash flowed down his back and stained his hickory shirt like spreading red ink spilling from a bottle, Hannigan systematically reduced Kesselring's eyes and nose and mouth and jaw to a bleeding wreck.

He was vaguely aware of Naco Red tugging at his armpits, lifting him off Kesselring's inert shape. The outlaw lay there without motion, eyes rolled back in their sockets to remind Hannigan of the bellies of fish that had turned over and died. For an instant he wondered if, in his frenzied effort to keep from being stabbed to death, he had killed Kesselring with the sheer fury of his fists. Then he saw the slow rise and fall of Kesselring's lungs, and knew Kesselring would live to fight again another day.

"He was loco, Slim," Naco Red was saying. "Stark ravin' crazy in the head. Reckon you saved Chihuahua, divin' under the muzzle of his rifle that way."

Hannigan, only now beginning to feel the stinging agony of the knife slash down his back, was plucking at his shirt buttons. "I saved Karl's life, you mean. You were all set to gun him down, Red. We—"

Hannigan broke off as there sounded a sudden violent crashing of hoofs on rubble, of a rider thrusting through the thickets which hid the cavern mouth. As one man the outlaws wheeled to face that direction, in time to see a horse and rider rein up in silhouette at the very doorway of their hiding place. Their well-kept secret had been discovered and if this rider had a law posse behind him—

Hannigan's .45 came blurring up from leather.

CHAPTER II

The Ramrod's Plan

IT WAS Naco Red's shout which stayed Hannigan's up-darting six-gun: "Hold it—it's the boss."

Twenty yards away, Brandy Boone swung down from stirrups, in time to see Hannigan lower his gun.

"What's going on?" Boone demanded angrily. "Why wasn't there a guard on duty to challenge me ridin' in? And what was that gunshot I heard just now?"

Brandy Boone was angrier than any of his men had ever seen him. He was a big man physically, this outlaw boss—six foot four and built like a granite statue. It was the overpowering quality of his personality, the ruthlessly domineering grip he wielded over other men, which had made Boone second only to the elusive Ramrod as the most-wanted outlaw in Texas.

He came striding toward them now, the wings of his bullhide chaps flapping about his thick legs. His green eyes were raw from lack of sleep and the irritation of alkali dust working under the lids. His jaw was bearded with a half-inch gray stubble which was proof that he had not shaved in the ten days and nights he had been away. This was unusual for Brandy Boone was a vain man, fastidious about his personal grooming at all times. That detail in itself, for a man as meticulous about his personal appearance as Brandy Boone, was ample evidence that he had been busy—possibly in flight from the law—since he had seen them last.

"What in hell's this? What's wrong with Karl?"

Boone halted a stride away from Kesselring's sprawled shape, staring down at the bloody ruin of his face, the red-and-silver blade of the bowie knife still clutched in his left fist. Then, seeing the crimson smears on the knuckles of his new gunslinger Slim Hannigan, Boone had his answer.

"Hannigan," Boone said grimly, cuffing back his coal-black stetson, "in all the years I've ramrodded this bunch, I've never had a fist fight bust loose between two of my men. How come this happened?"

Slim Hannigan was gingerly removing the ragged shreds of his blood-stained shirt. Chihuahua Charlie, who in addition to the cooking chores also served the gang as an impromptu doctor, was examining the long shallow knife cut on the man's back, muttering reassuringly in Spanish as he palpated the blood-slippery flesh on either side of the gash.

"Being a new man, Señor Boone," Hannigan said softly, "maybe you'd better get the story from your *segundo* here."

Boone turned his black scowl on Naco Red.

"I'm more interested in knowin' why I get back to the hideout and ride right in without bein' challenged by a guard," he said hoarsely, "than I am in whether Slim or Karl picked this fight."

Naco Red ran the back of his hand over his jaw, the wiry whiskers scraping in the taut silence like sandpaper. He said, "Slim here objected to Karl smokin' on guard duty, claimed the tobacco smell would endanger our security, day or night, if a passin' rider happened to—"

Boone was stripping off his buckskin gauntlets now, staring down at Kesselring. "He's right," the boss cut in. "Karl knows I don't allow smokin' on guard duty."

Naco Red seemed to relax. With Boone back, the responsibility of leadership had left Naco Red. "Well, anyway, Karl was arguing that out with Slim when he stumbled over Chihuahua, fell down. That made him blow his stack. He was all set to blast down Charlie with his saddle gun when Slim dove in and took care of Karl."

Slim Hannigan said carefully, "I'm not blaming Karl. We were all close to goin' loco, Brandy, wondering what was delaying you, wondering if the law had dabbed its loop on The Ramrod—"

Brandy Boone laughed sardonically, and the tension was broken at last.

"The Ramrod and I had a good powwow," he said. "I'll tell you all about it,

soon as I've had a bite of grub. It's worth waiting for, the news I bring, amigos. The biggest damn job this gang ever pulled off—with ten thousand in gold apiece when it's done."

He turned to Chihuahua and said, "Take Slim outside and fix up that gash in his hide. Pecos, you revive Karl. I want all of you listenin' when I report on my visit with The Ramrod."

SLIM HANNIGAN got a fresh shirt out of his saddlebags and followed Chihuahua Charlie out of the shadows. He was grateful for the chance to get some fresh air; he felt slightly dizzy, not from loss of blood but rather from lack of oxygen.

At the entrance of the cavern stood the big bayo coyote gelding, Geronimo, which was Brandy Boone's mount. It stood with head drooping, pads of foam sliding off its flanks, barrel heaving with exhaustion, bloodstains showing where Boone's rowels had cut too deeply.

Old Geronimo was a prime hunk of horseflesh and it made Hannigan's temper seeth at this evidence of Boone's mistreatment of the big dun. Unless the law had been hot on Boone's trail, there was no justification for running a bronc's hoofs in the ground as Boone had done getting back here.

The Pecos Kid passed them, toting a leather bucket, heading for the river to get water to resuscitate Kesselring. He muttered in passing, "You're a hoodoo to this outfit from here on out, Slim. Kesselring ain't one to bury a grudge and the outfit can't hang together if any of its members got a private feud going."

Chihuahua Charlie, close on Hannigan's heels, said waspishly, in Spanish, "Then let Brandy send Señor Karl away. His is the blame, not Sleem's here. I am always een your debt, Sleem."

A moment later the old *cociñero* was in front of Hannigan, holding the whippy willow limbs away to keep them from brushing the younger man's painfully gashed and bleeding back.

A dozen feet out of the cavern, Hannigan settled himself to his knees, feeling the warm, viscid flow of blood coursing under his belt onto his thighs. He remembered feeling Kesselring's blade slicing over the hump of his spine and realized how close he had been to a severed cord that could have killed him outright or paralyzed him for life. Once before, fighting a knife duel with a berserk *contrabandista* over in Presidio County, he had suffered a knife cut near the backbone, and the doctor had said how narrow that escape from lifelong invalidism had been.

Chihuahua Charlie went to work with swift competence, muttering in Chihuahuan vernacular as he took out a wad of sterilized cotton from the medical kit, soaked it with whiskey from a bottle kept under lock and key for such purposes only, and began swabbing dirt and sweat away from the long, shallow gash in Hannigan's hide.

The alcohol stung like hellfire. To get his mind off the pain, Slim stared off through the screening willow and salt cedar jungle at the sun-trembling landscape beyond. Approaching sunset lay golden and crimson on the chaparral across the river. The Red was at its seasonal low level, sluicing with a secretive sound over its gravel bars and quicksand bogs. This was one of the crossing spots of the broad Chisholm Trail, the highway which linked Texas with the railheads of Kansas.

Chihuahua Charlie's gentle touch cleared blood and grime away from an old, puckered scar high on Hannigan's back, between the shoulder blades. It was an odd shaped scar, and drew the old Mexican's comment: "Thees wan, she was close, no? Like a Spanish question mark, upside down, weethout the dot."

Hannigan made no comment, no attempt to explain the story back of that hook-shaped cicatrix. Chihuahua Charlie went on, "Somebody, someday, maybe he put the dot on the question mark weeth a bullet, no? You are too young to ride the owlhoot, amigo."

Hannigan said, "You are an older and a wiser man than I am. Why do you ride the owlhoot?"

The starlight glinted on the silver blade of Chihuahua Charlie's knife

Charlie got fresh cotton and finished cleansing the wound. As he worked he commented wistfully, "One more trip weeth Boone and I retire to Chihuahua and take the siesta to the end of my days, Sleem. I theenk El Jefe feex up the beeg, *beeg* job for us thees time. I hope so, amigo. I am old and *muy doloroso*. Brandy Boone, he can always get another cook, no?"

Charlie began snipping sterile gauze strips, daubing one with a healing salve and plastering it generously along the oozing knife cut. Chihuahua Charlie was a gentle old coot, Hannigan was thinking, with hands that could very well have become skilled in the use of a surgeon's scalpel, instead of winding up peeling spuds and onions for an outlaw gang's stew kettle . . .

"Ees feenished, amigo Sleem," Chihuahua Charlie said, handing Hannigan his fresh shirt. "Put on the *camiso* an' we weel get back to the cave to see what El Señor Boone an' El Jefe have een store for us, *si?*"

Hannigan shrugged into his shirt and began working at the buttons with shaking hands. He thought, that hook-shaped scar brands me from one end of the border to the other. But I'm lucky I didn't have to peel off my shirt in front of the others. Old Charlie was too busy with his bandages to give it much thought.

He followed the Chihuahua cook back into the stuffy confines of the cave. Boone's horse had been led back to the far end of the cavern, stripped of saddle and bridle, and an oat-filled nosebag hung in place; Hannigan could hear the grateful chomping of old Geronimo coming out of the semi-darkness.

KARL KESSELRING was sitting up, back braced against the shale wall of the cave, supporting his bruised and battered head between his hands. His eyes flashed malevolently as Slim Hannigan came into the range of vision of his fast swelling eyes. He said distinctly, "Later, my friend, later."

Brandy Boone was sitting on his haunches, alternately devouring a sandwich and swigging from a canteen. The Pecos Kid was back with the horses, rubbing down Geronimo. Naco Red was winding up a report of their uneventful ten-day layover here at the Red River, squatting at his chief's side.

When he had finished speaking, Naco asked the question which had been weighing on all their minds: "You contacted The Ramrod accordin' to plan, boss?"

Boone, sucking a tomato Red Naco had rustled from the grub box during Charlie's absence out front with Slim Hannigan, never stopped chewing as he said, "Located his go-between at the Index bar in Tascosa. My delay gettin' back was because when I reported to Room Seven at the Drovers' Hotel in Tascosa, accordin' to instructions, The Ramrod wasn't there yet. Didn't show up for four days. Nothin' to do but twiddle my thumbs and try to pretend I was a cattle buyer waitin' for a pool herd to get up from Encinal, headin' for Abilene."

The outlaws were grouping themselves into a circle, like Indians at a council fire. Karl Kesselring remained where he sat, removed from the group; he was in no shape to move for awhile yet.

But the others found their places in the circle: Naco Red and the Pecos Kid at Boone's elbows, as befitted the original nucleus members of the gang; with old Chihuahua Charlie and newcomer Slim Hannigan seated opposite them.

"I got both good news and bad news, men," Boone said, wiping his lips with a bandanna. "The good news can keep. That's The Ramrod's deal for us, which will have us riding out of here tonight."

"And the bad news?" Naco Red broke the following silence.

"The bad news I personally don't consider too bad," Brandy Boone said, "but it had The Ramrod worried. He's found out—" Boone paused dramatically, to give emphasis to the verbal bombshell he was about to explode—"that the Texas Rangers have assigned one of their ace men to the sole job of tracking down The Ramrod and exposing him and his henchmen to the hangrope."

A pulse hammered faster on Slim Hannigan's temple. Naco Red and the Pecos Kid considered Boone's "bad news" without visible emotion. From the background behind the squatting shapes of Chihuahua Charlie and Slim Hannigan came Karl Kesselring's invariably sarcastic reaction.

"Hell, the Rangers been after our scalps as long as we been operatin' in Texas. That's nothin' new. What's The Ramrod got his hackles up about that for?"

The grin faded from Boone's lips. "You don't understand, Karl. The Rangers have assigned a man to nothing else, he can spend the rest of his life if need be, to dab his loop on The Ramrod. Indirectly that means us because we're working for The Ramrod. Especially me, The Ramrod's right-hand-man. And the Ranger who's assigned to this job—you won't be snickering so loud when you find out who's on our tail, Karl."

The men glanced at each other, suddenly feeling the sharp edge of suspense laid against them.

"What Ranger?" sneered Karl Kesselring. "Not the old holy terror himself, Roarin' Bill McDowell?"

Boone shook his head. "McDowell's Rangerin' in the field is gone forever, old and stove-up as he is. No. The Ramrod got this straight from Austin, boys. The Frontier Battalion, Texas Rangers, has sicked the greatest ranger of them all on our trails. *The Lone Wolf himself, Jim Hatfield.*"

No sound greeted Boone's announcement, but the temperature of the cavern seemed suddenly to drop to freezing, somehow, as the men digested Boone's information, each reacting in his own way

to the impact of Jim Hatfield's name.

The best known Ranger in the Lone Star State, Hatfield had earned his "Lone Wolf" nickname because of his preference for working alone, usually undercover, rather than with a troop of Rangers. It seemed obvious to each of them that no less a Ranger than Hatfield himself would have been assigned to bringing an outlaw of The Ramrod's magnitude to justice.

"Have any of you, at any time in the past," Brandy Boone asked, "ever crossed the Lone Wolf Ranger's trail? Know what he looks like, what his voice sounds like?"

Boone's glance swept the circle and got nothing but headshakes, including Karl Kesselring in the background.

Reaching inside a pocket of his chaps, Boone drew out a folded sheet of paper.

"The Ramrod thought it wise," Boone said, "to read you a detailed description of Jim Hatfield, just in case we tangle horns with him on this big job ahead of us. So memorize these facts, amigos. They might save your lives if the Lone Wolf ever caught your scent."

READING from The Ramrod's paper, Boone's voice droned on and on, giving Jim Hatfield's physical measurements as if he were reading from a sheriff's wanted poster. Height six feet two, weight usually around one-ninety. Black hair, greenish-gray eyes. Usually rides seventeen-hand sorrel stallion named Goldy. Ambidexterous with twin Colt .45s. Talks with Texas drawl, in the rangeland vernacular as a rule, but is an educated man, with a degree in mining engineering. Has numerous minor scars, most prominent of which is a fishhook-shaped scar resulting from an old knife wound between the shoulder blades.

Old Chihuahua Charlie lifted his head, every nerve and muscle in his body tensing. Boone's voice droned on, listing the details of Jim Hatfield's physical appearance, but for the old cookee, one phrase of that description set his pulses racing, his blood heating. A fishhook-shaped scar between the shoulder blades.

Boone finished reading The Ramrod's notes on the Lone Wolf Ranger and looked up. "So just bear this in mind," he finished. "I think our tracks are covered too well for Jim Hatfield to cut our sign, especially since this big job of The Ramrod's is going to take us out of Texas anyway. But knowing Hatfield is on the prowl, let us be forewarned. Now, are there any questions?"

Chihuahua Charlie cleared his throat. "What color hair deed thees Rangero have, *por favor?*"

"Black, it says here. Now, any more questions?"

The old Mexican carefully avoided glancing at Slim Hannigan's flaming red hair. It was the Pecos Kid who broke the lengthening silence with, "Did you find out who The Ramrod is, boss? See him face to face? Hear his voice?"

Brandy grinned. "The Ramrod guards his secret well. He talked to me in a dark room, with a burglar's dark lantern blazing in my eyes and blinding me, and he spoke only in a whisper. I don't even know if he wore a mask."

Chihuahua Charlie buried his face in his hands. The old man was thinking, it would be an easy thing for a black-haired Ranger to dye his hair red and pretend to be a renegade. But I must always remember this Slim Hannigan risked his life to save me from Karl Kesselring's bullet. I must never forget that.

CHAPTER III

Hangrope for Horse Thieves

THE outlaw chief made himself comfortable, leaning back against a cushioning pile of tarp-covered supply packs. He took time out to stoke a briar pipe with tobacco, and more time to get it going well. Then, when it seemed the tension would be too great for his men to endure, he began to speak.

"The Ramrod sent us up here to the northern border of Texas," he said, "to

pull off the biggest wholesale livestock raid in the history of this frontier. Hearing about it staggered my imagination. A two-hundred-thousand-dollar haul, amigos."

The Pecos Kid grunted disappointedly, "High-jackin' a Kansas-bound beef herd on the Chisholm Trail? That'll take more'n the six of us—and it ain't so damned original either."

Brandy Boone shook his head. "It ain't cattle, men. It's horses. *Cavalry horses.* We'll be pickin' up this herd in the northwest corner of Palo Duro County and running it across the line into New Mexico Territory a week from tonight."

A sigh of relief whistled through Naco Red's lips. "Once we're outside of Texas we can stop worryin' about Ranger Hatfield. That's the best news you've brought back yet, Brandy."

Boone grunted contemptuously. "You still worryin' about Jim Hatfield bein' after The Ramrod? Hell, is this gang goin' soft on me? I've seen the day we'd take on a whole company of Rangers—"

Naco Red said angrily, "It's no joking matter, boss. I'd rather take on a whole company of Rangers any day than Hatfield. The sooner we're outside of his territory the better for me."

Karl Kesselring spoke in a subdued voice, "State boundary lines don't mean a damn thing to Hatfield, from what I've heard. He's been known to chase a man across the Rio Grande into Old Mexico, dab his loop on the poor son and turn him over to the *rurales.*"

"And another thing, boss," Naco Red returned to the discussion, "what's to prevent Hatfield from holdin' a U.S. deputy marshal's papers? That would make him dangerous in New Mexico or anywhere else in the U.S.A."

Brandy Boone waved his pipe in a gesture of impatience.

"Stop talking like a bunch of old maids," he snarled. "Hatfield was only assigned to this job a month ago. By the time he cuts our sign we'll be long gone."

The waddy who called himself Slim Hannigan spoke for the first time since joining the council circle.

"How can you be sure The Ramrod has the correct facts? If Hatfield is on a secret assignment, The Ramrod wouldn't be in on that secret."

Brandy grinned. "*Quien sabe?* For all I know The Ramrod could be the Governor himself, or Captain McDowell of Ranger headquarters. Who has ever seen his face? Or heard his voice, speaking out of a whisper?"

Hannigan said quietly, "But The Ramrod—did he quote the source of his information? I mean, Brandy, all this worry about Ranger Hatfield being on the case—it could be a rumor, nothing more."

Brandy sucked at his cold pipe, then started fishing in his pockets for a match.

"The Ramrod didn't quote the source of anything," he said. "And I sure as hell wouldn't question his information. After all, the newspapers all over the country are giving this Ramrod hombre credit for being in control of Texas outlawry. Who am I, a two-bit renegade, to question The Ramrod's information?"

Apparently satisfied, Slim Hannigan settled back on his haunches, busy shaping up a cigarette. At his side, Chihuahua Charlie sat as if frozen, a frown of concentration on his seamy forehead. The old Mexican had something very serious on his mind.

"To hell with all this palaver about Texas Rangers," growled the Pecos Kid impatiently. "You say we're shovin' a herd of stolen hosses west. How far west? Santa Fe?"

Boone got his pipe going again. "Further than that. Those horses are going to Fort Bowie, at the east entrance to Apache Pass."

The Pecos Kid's jaw sagged in astonishment. "Apache Pass? Hell, that's over in Arizona Territory!"

Brandy nodded. "Biggest cavalry base in the Southwest. They're buying remounts for four new regiments, the biggest expansion program in the U.S. Army's history. For the defense of the Mexican border, or something."

Naco Red said gloomily, "I don't care if

The Ramrod dug up this idea, it won't work. Have you ever tried to sell horseflesh to an army remount officer? I have. You'll find yourself all tied up with red tape and hogwash."

Boone said stubbornly, "The Ramrod will cut the red tape. This is a *muy grande* deal, men, sky-high stakes, not penny-ante."

Naco Red's skepticism was not abated in the least. "You sell a bronc to the U.S. Army," he said, "you get four, five times the going price, yes. But the bronc has to be solid color. It can't be over six years old. It's got to be fifteen hands high. It's got to be unbranded an' without a physical blemish."

As Naco Red ticked off each military specification on his stubby fingers, Boone let smoke purl through his lips and nodded complacently, smugly.

"This herd we're hazing to Bowie," he said, "meets the most critical inspection any Army vet or field officer could possibly give a nag. A thousand head of the finest horseflesh ever foaled in Texas, boys . . . and at the market end of the drive, Fort Bowie's paymaster is ready to pay two hundred dollars a head for every animal they accept, and they accept a hundred percent."

A LONG whistle came from the Pecos Kid. "That adds up to a couple hundred thousand pesos." The old ex-convict swiveled his head around to stare bleakly at Brandy Boone. "How much of a cut does The Ramrod get out of that?"

"Fifty-fifty. We split a hundred thousand dollars among us."

Karl Kesselring, always the pessimist, mumbled through battered and swollen lips, "You mean we got a seven-eight hundred mile trail drive across rough country —Apache country—for only half the take? Runnin' the risk of getting our scalps lifted—brushin' with local posses along the way, out to corral themselves a gang of hoss thieves? All for a fifty-fifty cut?"

A scowl carved its notch between Brandy Boone's eyebrows.

"Karl, I'm getting fed up with your troublemaking, your beefing. The Ramrod did the brain work, the planning. The Ramrod is providing the horses; the Ramrod has arranged for their sale, too far away from Texas ever to be traced. Hell, the remount officer at Bowie will think

A TALL TEXAS TALE

HEADSTRONG

A TEXAN, stationed with an Army outfit overseas, got so homesick and fretted that he was unfit for duty. His commanding officer sent him to the hospital, hoping the psychiatrist could straighten him out.

At the first interview, the psychiatrist announced, "We are going to have an experiment. I shall create a sound and ask you what it causes you to think about."

Walking across the room, the doctor clapped his hands smartly. "Well?" he asked.

"Makes me think of Texas," said the native son.

"Why should hand-clapping make you think of Texas?" pursued the psychiatrist.

"Because," was the reply, "Texas is all I ever think about."

—Jack Kytle

they're Colorado stock. We'll be carrying certified bills of sale to prove it."

There was an uneasy, brooding silence building up now as the men began to comprehend the overwhelming enormity of the Ramrod's rustling job. In Texas, the penalty for stealing one horse was the hangrope. For stealing a thousand head—well, you could only hang once, so what the hell?

"Boss," the Pecos Kid asked suddenly, "did you say we'll be rustlin' a *thousand* head of horses?"

"The Ramrod has a contract to sell a thousand head to the Army at Fort Bowie, yes."

The Pecos Kid waggled his head dubiously. "There must be a big mistake somewhere. There ain't a thousand head of horses capable of meeting Army specifications in the whole State of Texas, let alone in one herd on one ranch."

Boone grinned, enjoying the incredulity of his men.

"Didn't I tell you this whole thing staggers the imagination? But that's the way The Ramrod works . . . The herd is behind fences over in Palo Duro county, not a hundred and fifty miles from this spot. On Colonel Jeff Britton's J Bar B ranch."

Slim Hannigan's head jerked up. "You don't mean Jeff Britton, the ex-senator?"

"The same. His ranch is being used as a holding pen for the Panhandle Horse Breeders' Cooperative Association. Every stock breeder in Texas, from the north line to as far south as San Saba, has brought up horses to join this pool herd at the J Bar B. It's been planned over two years now."

Slim spoke again. "And these horses are contracted for, you say, over at Fort Bowie? Colonel Britton pulled strings to get this big order from the government?"

Brandy Boone nodded. "The Colonel used his political influence to help out the Cooperative Association, yes. But not through Fort Bowie. The herd is supposed to be hazed north to the big cavalry training center at Fort Riley, Kansas. Colonel Britton actually owns maybe five percent of the horses himself. The herd is made up of stock, as I said, from ranches all over northern Texas."

The men were beginning to relax now, as they saw some glimmer of sense in this big deal of The Ramrod's. Somehow, the elusive masked outlaw had gotten wind of Jeff Britton's pool herd intended for Fort Riley—and intended to rustle it with the help of Boone and his henchmen.

"How do we take over this remount stuff?" Naco Red asked. "Raid the J Bar B direct? Or wait until the herd's on the trail north and stampede it, drygulch the Colonel's crew and round 'em up later?"

Boone made sucking sounds on his pipestem. "The Ramrod has always believed is supplanting brawn with brains," he rebuked his straw boss. "That's why you'll never be a big operator, Red, always a small-time picayune horse thief and border hopper, like me." Boone's adding the phrase "like me" took the sting out of his words. "No, we won't be stampeding any horse herds. We won't be swapping lead with the Colonel's crew at the ranch. Instead, his crew is going to *help* us shove those horses southwest instead of north. Savvy?"

The straw boss shook his head. "No, I don't savvy. If the colonel starts a trail drive to Kansas, he'll sure as hell put up a kick when he finds the leaders being hazed around toward Arizona."

BOONE leaned forward and tapped Naco Red's knee with his pipestem. "Here's how The Ramrod uses his brains, Red. A military courier is going to reach the J Bar B with orders canceling the Fort Riley requisition for one thousand remounts, and shifting the destination of the trail drive to Fort Bowie, Arizona Territory. Savvy that much?"

Naco Red nodded uncertainly. "Yeah—yeah, I can savvy where The Ramrod could fake an army message, yeah, sure. But where do we come in? Where do we take over?"

Boone shrugged. "Put yourself in Colonel Britton's place. He has been counting on this order from Fort Riley, Kansas,

only four hundred odd miles northeast of his ranch. Across flat prairie, no special danger from Indian attack en route. And here, out of the blue, comes the army order to shift the buying market for remounts out to Arizona, nearly twice as far away, over rough mountain and desert country, with Comanches and Kiowas and Apaches droolin' over every prime horse they see—"

The Pecos Kid laughed softly into the gathering darkness.

"This Colonel Britton will need a larger crew for this drive west," he said. "Drovers familiar with the Santa Fe trail."

Brandy Boone's grin widened, his teeth flashing white in the gloom.

"By a happy coincidence, men," he chuckled, "only a few hours after the army courier's arrival from Fort Riley, who should come riding in across the New Mexican line but a half-dozen Santa Fe traders, fresh back from Taos, men who know the trails, the water and grass conditions. The poor old Colonel, who has been about to give up the idea of gettin' rich quick selling horses to the military, jumps at the chance to hire these Santa Fe hombres. And who are those hombres? Us!"

Chihuauhua Charlie got stiffly to his feet. He had not spoken a syllable since asking about Ranger Hatfield's black hair.

"When," asked the *cociñero,* "do we leave for thees J Bar B?"

Boone grinned, knowing how much his men hated this dank hole, how eager they were to be hitting the trail.

"Tonight. This is Sunday. It will take us till Wednesday to reach the New Mexican border and be ready to double back onto Colonel Britton's spread, posing as Santa Fe men. The courier from Fort Riley will deliver the news to Britton about the change in delivery points, some time Thursday."

"And this courier," Naco Red cut in, "is really working for The Ramrod, too?"

"*Por seguro*—who else?" Boone laughed. "This courier is the go-between who arranged my meeting with The Ramrod at Tascosa, a young hombre named Dick Dixon. He knows how to act like a soldier—seein' as how he's AWOL from Fort Riley."

Chihuahua Charlie shuffled off, to start preparing their evening meal. Boone's voice droned on above the clang of pots and pans from the old Mexican's corner of the grotto:

"A few hours after the courier shows up at Britton's, we'll come ridin' in, supposedly from Santa Fe. And by Friday or the day after we'll be on our way to Arizona—with one thousand head of the best remount stock in Texas."

Slim Hannigan's voice spoke up from the gloom: "Will we get to see The Ramrod—or is he keeping in the background?"

Boone shrugged. "Wednesday night, we—or at least I—have a meeting scheduled with The Ramrod and this courier, Dixon, at Dixon's camp on the New Mexico line, out west a few miles from Britton's place. We'll get our final orders for pullin' off this job then. For all I know, the Ramrod may not require us to take over the herd from Britton's crew. Maybe we'll wait, make our strike after the army has paid off Britton."

A torch gleamed in the darkness as Chihuahua Charlie got preparations for supper under way. There were horses and bridles to check, guns to clean and load, packs to ready for the mules, bedrolls to prepare for the night ride ahead. In the milling confusion, Brandy Boone sought out Slim Hannigan.

"The Ramrod sent you his best regards, Slim. He was glad to know you had joined us okay. He looks forward to meeting you."

Slim's reaction escaped Boone, who was partially blinded by the sputtering firelight.

"Like I told you, Brandy, my father and The Ramrod were comrades-in-arms during the War Between the States. I've never laid eyes on The Ramrod—knowingly, at least."

BOONE nodded, knocking dottle out of his pipe. "We won't be riding for another five hours or so," Boone said.

"Whose turn," he called out in a louder voice, "is the guard post? We can't risk bein' surprised here our last evening."

Slim Hannigan said, "It's my shift, Brandy. I was about due to take over when Karl and me tangled."

Slim started to turn away, holding his arms stiffly against his sides to keep from disturbing the knife slash down his back. He winced as Boone reached out to lay a hand unknowingly on the bandaged wound as he said, "We'll be together on a long trail, son. I want to see you and Karl shake hands and make this up. Can't have private feuds festering inside the organization."

Hannigan grinned. "I bear Kesselring no ill will."

Brandy Boone grinned spontaneously. "*Bueno.* You've a good man, Slim. And the stake you'll get out of this summer's work will make up for those years you spent at San Castro bustin' rock."

Slim Hannigan turned away, picking up a rifle on the way past his bedroll and disappearing on his way to take up the last tour of guard duty they would be making at this hideout.

In the background, Chihuahua Charlie squatted on his haunches, his eyes lingering on the cavern mouth where Slim Hannigan had made his exit. Whatever old Charlie was thinking was impossible to read in his cataract-mottled eyes or inscrutable, seamy face.

Naco Red caught Boone's barely-perceptible beckoning of a finger and joined his boss over at the latter's bedroll.

"Naco," Boone whispered gravely, "I've come to the conclusion that Karl Kesselring has outlived his time with us."

The *segundo* nodded. "I agree. He is a troublemaker. If Hannigan hadn't dove in, I'd have shot Karl myself when he was hauling down that .30-30 on old Charlie."

Boone's eyes narrowed speculatively. "This Hannigan could replace him, keep us at full strength. What is your opinion of Slim, now that you've had time to study him?"

Naco Red took his time about answering that one.

"I don't know, boss," he said finally. Hannigan's a queer one. There is something about him that scares me. I keep thinking, the rest of us been riding with you ten years or more, and get a chance at this big deal of the Ramrod's. Along comes Hannigan and gets cut in on it in less than a month. Maybe that's why I'm prejudiced against him."

Boone shrugged. "Anyway," he said, "we can always keep an eye on Slim. Karl, now, is a different proposition. Naco, I think tonight's as good a night as any to send Karl to perdition. And we'll let Slim Hannigan win his spurs in the outfit by bein' Karl Kesselring's executioner. If he refuses—then Slim Hannigan dies too. I can't trust men who won't obey orders."

CHAPTER IV

Romance for a Ranger?

THE ruggedly handsome young rider whom the Boone gang knew as "Slim Hannigan" made his way to the rim of the bluff overlooking the Red River and a broad view of the Texas plains.

Alone in the darkness there, he seated himself on a cottonwood stump and removed one cowboot, needing to make sure that he had not lost a certain object he had very carefully secreted in the lining of that Coffeyville. He was not a superstitious man, but this talisman was for good luck.

His exploring fingers quickly located the cunningly hidden compartment between the layers of pliable kangaroo leather, and drew from the pocket two objects, both made of metal.

One glinted in the starshine, revealing its shape: a five-pointed silver star enclosed in a silver circle. The star was engraved TEXAS RANGER. It was the most honored emblem of frontier heraldry, this law badge.

On its rear side had been punched the

identification number 316. This corresponded to a number on the roster of the Texas Rangers at headquarters in Austin, where a clerk could thus determine the name of the holder of Badge No. 316; James Hatfield, better known throughout Texas by his nickname of "The Lone Wolf."

The Lone Wolf's mind was occupied with thoughts of Chihuahua Charlie. He wondered if the cook had connected the scar he had seen on Slim Hannigan's back with the description of the scar on Jim Hatfield's back. It worried him slightly, but his thoughts were soon caught up by the other object he had taken from his boot.

The other object hidden in the secret compartment of his boot was a two-inch square of tin—a tintype photograph of a beautiful girl of twenty-three. The back side was faced with cardboard on which had been written "With love to Jim from Linda Lee. San Antonio, Aug. 23."

Linda Lee Sherman had been on Jim Hatfield's mind during these past ten days of posing as an ex-convict. Hers was the only woman's picture he carried with him, and he was coming to realize that carrying it was not fair to the code he lived by.

There was a saying among Rangers that their professional "Three Rs" should be "Rangers, Reject Romance!" Men carrying the obligations of a Texas Ranger, living on borrowed time as long as they wore the star, had no business falling in love.

Hatfield had met Linda Lee a year ago, while working on a case in San Antonio. She was employed as a summer substitute clerk in the Ranger branch headquarters, an orphan whose guardian was a prominent rancher up in the Panhandle. They had known each other but a few days, and Cupid had made the most of his opportunity.

Their last night together, before Hatfield had been transferred to a remote corner of Texas to work on another case, they had discussed their growing love for each other during a moonlight stroll along the plaza in front of the historic Alamo.

"As long as I'm a Ranger, Linda Lee," the Lone Wolf had said, "I got no business even thinking of love or marriage. I don't think I could ever give up my Ranger commission, but I don't know."

That night—each wanting to play fair with the other—they had agreed on a year's separation, to test their romance. Very slowly, over that lapse of time which was nearing its end now, the Lone Wolf Ranger had been steeling himself to choose between love and duty, not quite sure in his own mind what his decision would be.

And now The Ramrod was bringing Hatfield and Linda Lee back together—for Linda Lee's home was at the J Bar B ranch.

Seating himself on a cottonwood stump, working the tight boot on his foot, Jim Hatfield stared off into the mellow Texas night and let his memory wander back to the last time he had seen Colonel Jeff Britton, target for The Ramrod's theft of a horse herd.

Colonel Britton was more than the owner of the J Bar B horse ranch. He had been a state senator and through his efforts in the legislature had been a great help to the Texas Rangers, budgetwise. He was a Civil War hero. He had long been a friend of Jim Hatfield's, and most important of all to Jim tonight, the Colonel was Linda Lee Sherman's legal guardian.

It had been two months ago when Jim Hatfield had been summoned by telegraph to appear in Austin for a personal conference with his superior, Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell. Arriving there, he had been astonished to find the Ranger headquarters packed with dignitaries—the governor, the attorney general, sheriffs of every county bordering the Mexican line, and the leading stockmen of the state. Among the latter was Colonel Jeff Britton, president of the Panhandle Horse Breeders' Cooperative Association.

"Jim," Captain McDowell said after he had introduced his ace Ranger to the assembled men, "I have delayed calling this secret executive meeting to order until

your arrival. The purpose of this meeting is simple. The State of Texas is going to declare an all-out war on frontier outlawry. In my opinion, as I informed His Excellency the Governor, I feel that the biggest blow we can strike against the forces of crime in the Lone Star State is to nab the biggest criminal of them all. I am sure you know who I mean."

Hatfield felt his pulses racing. All eyes were on him.

"You are undoubtedly referring to an outlaw with no more substance than a rumor, a shadow. They call him El Jefe in Mexico—or merely 'The Ramrod' here in Texas."

EVERY man in the room nodded, every eye turned on the Lone Wolf Ranger. Celebrity though he was, Jim Hatfield had not previously met the bulk of the citizens here, nor were they familiar with his personal appearance. As much as possible, Hatfield had worked inconspicuously in the past, preferring undercover assignments whenever Captain Roaring Bill McDowell had swung one his way.

Ephriam Ogilvy, the distinguished Governor of the State of Texas, caught Hatfield's eye.

"I have been under increasing pressure from the citizens of this State," the governor admitted, "to do something about putting a halt to The Ramrod's power. The federal authorities along the border, the Immigration and Customs authorities, the new U.S. Border Patrol, and the various sheriffs of the Rio Grande counties, who are present at this meeting, have all been powerless to put a finger on this arch criminal."

"His very anonymity," said the pompous Attorney General of the State, "is his shield and his refuge against capture. What does The Ramrod look like? How old is he? Is he Texan or Mexican? Man or woman? No one seems to know. Yet he pulls the strings for the organized rustling, smuggling, and other crimes which are brought to my attention from one corner of the state to the other."

Captain McDowell rapped his gavel to still the growing buzz of comment from the assembled audience.

"All of us know we're up against a superior brain," Governor Ogilvy resumed speaking. "But although The Ramrod has built himself a seemingly impregnable organization of criminals, the State of Texas likewise has an organization with a proud tradition of service to the frontier welfare —the Rangers. Captain McDowell here is in charge of the Rangers. Captain, I believe I will allow you to inform Ranger Jim Hatfield here, why I requested his presence at this high-level secret session."

Roaring Bill's seamed, weathered countenance quivered with emotion as he turned to the Lone Wolf Ranger.

"Jim," he said huskily, "I take my orders from the Governor. You take your orders from me. But this order I'm about to hand out now is one you can refuse and no man in this room will accuse you of cowardice. On the other hand, if you accept, you will be putting me in the position of signing your death warrant."

"If you want me to bring in The Ramrod," Jim said quietly, "I'll accept the assignment. Hell, whoever this Ramrod is, he's only a human being, not supernatural. He can be brought to bay."

Hatfield's words were drowned in the storm of applause from the Governor and the others. The first hand to reach his in congratulation and gratitude was Colonel Jeff Britton's.

"Wait till I tell Linda Lee about this," the Colonel had said. "She'll be fit to bust with pride. She thinks a lot of you, Jim."

And now, this very night, he would be heading for Colonel Britton's J Bar B ranch—and Linda Lee would be there, awaiting his decision about future plans, as he would be awaiting hers.

"I've got to give her up," Hatfield whispered. "It isn't fair."

Out of the night came a noise which rudely snapped the Ranger back to reality. Someone was climbing up the brushy river bank from the direction of Boone's hideout cavern.

"Who goes?" Hatfield sent his soft challenge toward the approaching climber.

His thumb cocked the Winchester hammer.

"Brandy. I want to talk to you, Slim."

Hatfield felt his muscles tensing. In joining Brandy Boone's renegade band, he had assumed another man's identity rather than making up the name "Slim Hannigan." The real Slim Hannigan had been knifed to death by a cellmate at the Texas Prison for Incorrigibles at San Castro, just prior to Captain McDowell's secret meeting with the Governor in Austin. On his corpse the prison doctor had found the smuggled letter which had reached Slim Hannigan inside the penitentiary only a day before he was to be released after serving a five-year sentence for manslaughter. That letter had been signed "The Ramrod" and had recommended Slim Hannigan as a henchman for a Rio Grande outlaw sub-chieftain named Brandywine Boone, whose hideout was in a certain cantina in a certain back street of Villa Acuña, Mexico, across the river from Del Rio.

"If it's about my little ruckus with Karl Kesselring, boss," Jim Hatfield said, "I already told you I'm more than willing to shake hands with him."

BRANDY BOONE, puffing from the exertion of the short, steep climb up from the riverbed level, loomed as a black blot against the star-powdered heavens. Hatfield moved over on the cottonwood stump, making room for the desperado chief.

"It's about Kesselring that I want to speak to you," Boone said. "I'm sendin' him up here to talk to you as quick as I get back. He thinks I'm orderin' him up here to apologize for workin' you over with that knife."

Hatfield said, "He didn't know what he was doing. Some men crack up under pressure, some men crack up under danger, and some men, like Kesselring, crack up from monotony. I hold him no grudge."

Boone said hoarsely, "That's just it. I can't afford to have a man who cracks up under *any* kind of pressure, Slim, as a member of my outfit. I served time with Karl. We've fought back-to-back out of many a tight situation. But this evenin,' goin' loco like he did, Karl proved that he's not the type of man I want in my outfit."

Hatfield felt his pulses pick up. Boone was leading up to something of a grim and sinister nature, he sensed.

"Well," Hatfield drawled indifferently, "pay him off and send him packin', Brandy."

Boone shook his head. "That's impossible, Slim. You can see that. Karl knows we're workin' with The Ramrod on this deal to Arizona, for instance. Do you think the rest of the boys would be easy in their minds if they knew Kesselring was on the prowl, knowin' our plans? Do you think The Ramrod would let me live very long, firin' one of my men? No, Slim. Joinin' my outfit is like a devout Mexican girl takin' her marriage vows. It's for life. Once in, there's no getting out—alive."

Again that prickling sensation of suspense needled the knife cut on Hatfield's back. He sensed, now, what Brandy Boone had come up here to the guard post to do.

"So you've decided to shuffle Kesselring out of the deck?" he asked the outlaw beside him.

Against the stars, Hatfield saw Boone's steeple-peaked stetson bobbing as he nodded in the affirmative.

"We're setting out on this big deal of The Ramrod's within the hour," Boone whispered. "Kesselring isn't going with us. He's too dangerous a weakling to keep with us, too dangerous as a potential traitor to send on his way." Boone pulled in a deep breath. "So," he added in a steely monotone, "Karl plays out his string tonight. He dies and his body is going to be chucked into the Red River quicksand bogs before this hour is out."

Hatfield came to his feet, feeling a gelid rime of sweat burst out on his temples. He sensed what was coming next.

"You knew when you looked me up in Villa Acuña that I run a tough outfit,

Slim," Boone said, rising with him. "I turn out some pretty tough orders, sometimes, but nothing I wouldn't do myself, or have done in the past. Your first job workin' under me, Slim, is goin' to be tough. But you'll do it."

Hatfield licked his lips.

"You want me to kill Kesselring—dunk him in the river?"

Boone was backing away. "Yes. You're on guard. Karl will be crawlin' up the river bank, per my orders, to make his apologies to you. Down in the cave, the boys will hear a shot. They'll rush out to see what happened, whether we're under attack or something."

Boone was invisible in the blackness now, only his whisper floating back to Hatfield's shocked ears. "They'll find out that Karl failed to answer your challenge, and you shot him. He has no friends in the gang, Slim, so you'll make no enemies, murdering him. Savvy?"

CHAPTER V

Violence by the River

JIM HATFIELD felt a sick green wave of revulsion go through his vitals. This was the worst dilemma he had ever faced as a Ranger.

If he stayed in character, impersonating Slim Hannigan, he would murder Karl Kesselring with no more compunction than he would crush a spider underfoot. An outlaw gang was no stronger than its weakest member, and Kesselring had proved his weakness tonight. As an outlaw leader, responsible for keeping the band together as a functioning unit, Brandy Boone was acting within his rights in ordering the execution of a weakling whose presence in the group jeopardized them all.

Boone had passed along the job of executioner to his newest man, which once again was strictly in character with the situation, Hatfield had to admit. In a way, Boone was testing out his new henchman, making sure he was capable of carrying out a "tough" order, as he had described Kesselring's proposed murder.

But Jim Hatfield was a Ranger, not a renegade. Even in line of duty—with the eventual exposure and arrest of The Ramrod as his goal—Hatfield knew he could not shoot down Karl Kesselring in cold blood tonight.

Yet, if he refused to carry out Boone's order, he knew he would himself be shot down without mercy, along with Kesselring. Boone was a rock-hard, utterly soulless man. When he gave an order, he expected it to be carried out promptly and efficiently. And after all, it was not an assignment Boone could hand out to the Pecos Kid, or old Charlie, or Naco Red. These men had ridden and lived and slept and joked with Kesselring too long.

Hatfield cradled his rifle under his arm and began pacing back and forth along the rim of the cutbank, nervous as a caged animal. What was he to do? Where did his duty lie? Should he commit a brutal murder as part of the personal sacrifices he would be called upon to make in this elaborate scheme to ally himself with The Ramrod and eventually bring that mysterious criminal to justice?

I can't do it, Hatfield thought. I don't see any way out of it, but I can't cut him down in cold blood.

He cursed Boone's delay in getting back to the hideout tonight. Five minutes sooner, and the outlaw chief would have averted Kesselring's blow-up and the knifing which had led to this impossible predicament.

Momentarily, Hatfield debated whether to let Kesselring know Boone had sentenced him to death, giving Kesselring a chance to swim the river and shift for himself against the perils of starvation, exposure and hostile Indians up in the Nations.

But that wouldn't pan out either, he reminded himself, remembering Boone's parting words. The gang would hear a shot, come trooping out, and find Kesselring dead, shot down by Slim Hannigan

on guard duty. "You'll make no enemies, murdering him," Boone had said.

Maybe, Hatfield thought desperately, I can pretend to let Kesselring get away, escape into the brush.

But that, too, was impossible. With Kesselring at large, Boone would report back to The Ramrod and the whole deal would probably be called off, for fear Kesselring would tip off the law concerning Boone's plans for stealing Britton's horse herd. And a priceless opportunity to nab The Ramrod would be lost.

Hatfield groaned aloud, in an agony of indecision as he heard a noise in the brush down below. Kesselring was even now shouldering his way out of the cavern, on his way up to the lookout post on the bluff to apologize to Slim Hannigan.

Another couple of minutes, and the Lone Wolf would be face to face with an irrevocable decision—whether to murder Kesselring or spare him and either have to take flight, dropping the case he had been assigned, or face death himself from an angry Brandy Boone.

Up to this evening, things had been working out with the precision of a well-plotted chess game. The whole scheme for Hatfield's tracking down The Ramrod had had its inception in the report which Captain Bill McDowell had received recently from the warden of the Texas Prison for Incorrigibles at San Castro, regarding the death of an inmate named Slim Hannigan.

Hannigan, McDowell had explained to Jim Hatfield at a secret conference three weeks ago, had been knifed to death in a cellblock brawl at San Castro, on the very eve of his release from prison. This information had been kept a strict secret.

Concealed in the lining of the dead man's prison dungarees, the undertaker had found a letter which had somehow been smuggled inside the prison walls to Hannigan. Hatfield, reading that letter in Ranger headquarters, had memorized its text:

Brandy Boone:
This will serve to introduce young Slim Hannigan. While I have never had the pleasure of meeting him personally, he is the son of one of my compadres in the Lost Cause. Slim's reputation as a gunman and border hopper are common knowledge. He comes to you after having served five years at T.P.I. I will consider it a personal favor if you will lend him a hand by making him a member of your own little band.
The Ramrod

"See where this gives us a lead toward carrying out the Governor's ultimatum to capture The Ramrod at any cost, Jim?" McDowell had exulted. "This note links Brandy Boone with The Ramrod—and we know where Brandy Boone can be found. Hannigan's description fits you to a T, except that Hannigan was red-headed, and a bleach and dye job will take care of that. The news of Hannigan's death hasn't leaked out of San Castro Prison."

"Meaning I'm to impersonate Hannigan," Hatfield said. "But suppose I can't locate Brandy Boone? Evidently the real Hannigan knows where he holes up."

"And so do we. He's in Villa Acuña, across the river from Del Rio, living at Numero Cinco on Salispuedes Street."

The rest had been simple enough. Jim Hatfield, thoroughly coached by the San Castro warden concerning Slim Hannigan's past record and even his mannerisms and personal habits, had had no difficulty in locating Brandy Boone at Villa Acuña.

ARMED with The Ramrod's authentic letter, plus an official release signed by the governor and the San Castro warden proving that Hannigan had served out his prison sentence, together with Hannigan's personal scrapbook of newspaper clippings concerning his own career of outlawry, Jim Hatfield had been able to pass for the ex-convict without difficulty.

His main worry—that members of Boone's gang might have known the real Hannigan—proved groundless. His only concern now was a trivial one, keeping his hair dyed red as fast as the black hair grew out.

Two days after being welcomed into Boone's gang they were headed northward for the Red River, on The Ramrod's orders.

And now, standing on the south bank of the Red, the tall Ranger who was impersonating Slim Hannigan found himself facing one of the toughest dilemmas of his career behind the star. Clawing his way over the brink of the shale bank, Karl Kesselring made a tall, lank shape against the stars. The fateful moment was here.

"Sing out!" Hatfield hissed, timed with the clicking noise of levering a shell into the breech of his Winchester. "Who goes? *Quien es?*"

Kesselring's heavy breathing sawed the night stillness.

"Don't shoot, Slim. It's me, Karl."

Hatfield moved forward warily, Winchester covering the lean outlaw.

"Are you relieving me already?" Hatfield asked. "I've only been here half an hour."

Kesselring said thickly, his speech hampered by his puffed-up, scabbed-over lips, "Boone sent me up. Wants us to—well, shake hands an' settle our little ruckus. Reckon you know I was sort of out of my head, Slim, when I jumped old Charlie."

Hatfield moved in closer. There was starlight enough for him to see that Kesselring was not packing his guns. Boone was taking no chances on Kesselring beating a drop, up here.

"Listen, Karl," the Lone Wolf said swiftly, "did you know Boone was up here palavering with me a few minutes ago?"

Kesselring shrugged. "I knew he was outside somewhere," the outlaw conceded. "What was he tellin' you?"

The man was scared, suddenly panicked; Hatfield knew that from the way his voice suddenly tapered off into a thin, reedy whine. He thought, Kesselring knows he's through.

"Boone gave me orders to bushwhack you, Karl. He considers you too unstable for the security of the rest of us. Deadwood for pruning. I'm supposed to tell the others you didn't answer my challenge—and orders are to shoot first, investigate afterwards."

Kesselring appeared to shrink up, like a salted snail. When he spoke his voice came in a choked whimper. "You're lying, Slim. I been ridin' with Brandy ten years now. We busted out of San Castro together. He wouldn't sell me down the river, just to—to make room for a new man."

Hatfield said, "You're the one who's lyin', Karl, and you know it. But I'm telling you this, and I want you to think it over: I haven't pulled this trigger yet. The time Brandy allotted you has already run out and we're still standing here talkin', Karl. You savvy what that means?"

Kesselring licked his lips. "It means—you don't want my blood on your soul?"

"Right. But I don't want to have Boone's hot lead in my brisket, either. So what's the answer to that one? If I let you go, I'm a goner. If I save my own hide, I got to shoot you down like a coyote."

Karl Kesselring made a gagging sound deep in his throat. He choked out in a strangled undertone, "Let me run for it, Slim, that's all I ask. I'm beggin' you, Slim, let me have a chance at swimmin' the river, an' I can't swim a lick."

Hatfield knew time was fast running out on him. Down in the cavern, Boone would be listening for the rifle shot, already overdue, which would prove his new man could take orders, however grim they might be.

HATFIELD stepped to one side, gesturing southward toward the endless black prairie stretching off and away under the foamy glitter of the Texas skies.

"Start running, Karl," he said. "I only ask one thing, Karl. One promise."

Kesselring was babbling like an infant. "Anything, Slim, I'll do anything for you, all I want's a chance—the chance you'd give a scorpion under foot."

"When you have a chance to think over what I've done for you tonight, don't try to do anything to ruin this big deal with The Ramrod. We stand to rake in twenty thousand apiece on that horse drive to Fort Bowie."

Kesselring nodded. "You got my word on it, amigo."

The big outlaw turned, heading past Hatfield, thinking he was being given a few minutes' head start on foot before his erstwhile trail partners picked up the scent. But he got only two strides.

Moving in swiftly behind Kesselring, the Lone Wolf Ranger drove the butt of his Winchester like a javelin toward the base of the outlaw's skull. Karl Kesselring sprawled face-forward in the dirt, knocked as cold as a pole-axed steer in an abattoir.

Aiming the Winchester skyward, Hatfield jerked trigger. The crashing reverberations of the gunshot racketed off across the lonesome reaches of the prairie, echoed from the low banks on the north side of the river, went clamoring into infinity.

Laying the smoking rifle to one side, Hatfield reached down to grab the unconscious outlaw by his spurred boots and dragged him, face down, to the edge of the cutbank. Another hard shove and Karl Kesselring was rolling, limp as a sack of raw bones, down the brushy incline toward the tules rimming the river's edge twenty feet below.

Snatching up the rifle, Hatfield started skidding down the declivity through the stirred-up dust of Kesselring's somersaulting passage. He was picking himself to his feet when he heard the clamor of voices at the cavern mouth some twenty yards away.

"What is it?" Boone's voice challenged from the darkness. "Stay back, men, until we see what's up."

Jim Hatfield called back softly, "An hombre tried sneaking up behind me, up on the rim. That shot you heard was mine. Knocked him plumb over the edge, down in these tules."

Naco Red's fear-taut voice, whispering to Boone, reached Hatfield. "Somebody trailed you over from Tascosa, Brandy, and spotted Slim standin' guard."

Across the distance, Boone and his henchmen saw a match spurt briefly into flame. They saw Slim Hannigan, cupping the match between his palms, wade out into the waist deep tules and bend down to inspect a sprawled shape, invisible in the weeds.

The match was blown out and the tall red-head stood up.

"Boss!" Hatfield's whisper carried to the tense group waiting at the cavern mouth. "It's Kesselring! Karl, our own man. He's dead, my slug caught him square in the heart!"

Hatfield heard the Pecos Kid's oath. "Kesselring swore he'd get revenge on Slim Hannigan. That's why he was sneakin' up on him, even after you made him leave his guns behind, Brandy."

Brandy Boone spoke quietly into the void: "We'll saddle and ride, men. Slim, chuck Karl's carcass out into the river for catfish bait. Nobody's blaming you for this killin'."

CHAPTER VI

"Keep Your Shirt On!"

A VAST relief flowed through Jim Hatfield as he got direct orders to dispose of Kesselring's body. If Boone and the others had come up for a closer view they would have seen through the deception.

Acting swiftly, so as to give the situation no time to worsen by Boone changing his mind about seeing for himself that Kesselring was dead, Hatfield hoisted the unconscious man, jackknife fashion, over his shoulder and headed out through the tules, in full view of Boone and the others.

Fifty feet away from the cavern mouth, in the approximate center of the waist-high tule growth, he lowered Kesselring's inert weight to the moist ground, but without breaking his own stride. At this distance he knew he was invisible to the men grouped around the cavern mouth, but they could hear every step he took on a night as hushed as this.

Another fifty feet and he was clear of the tules, with the Red River's chocolate-colored waters gliding before him. There

was a deep pool here, where he and the others had done their swimming these past ten nights, obtaining relief from the humidity and heat of the daytime hours.

Bleached driftwood had gathered along the inshore side of the pool. Picking up a heavy chunk of waterlogged debris, Jim Hatfield hurled it as far as he could out into the river. The driftwood landed with a geysering splash, the sound of which he knew had carried to the others back at the cavern.

Their imaginations would identify that splash as the dead body of their erstwhile trail mate. And now, if Karl Kesselring didn't start regaining consciousness and give out with a loud groan, no one would ever know that Hatfield's victim was alive, safely hidden out in the tule bed.

He slogged his way back to the mouth of the cavern, making as much racket as he could, just in case Kesselring's breathing became too audible. The well-placed blow to the base of the outlaw's skull should keep him insensible, the Lone Wolf figured, a good hour or two after they had ridden out.

Entering the cavern, Jim Hatfield squeezed his eyes shut momentarily as he faced the glare of Chihuahua Charlie's camp lantern—the first time light had been permitted in their hideout since their arrival here. This cave, it seemed, had been spotted by the Pecos Kid several years previously when the Kid was on a Chisholm Trail cattle drive that had made a crossing upstream from this spot, and a straggler had led him to the cavern under the cutbank. Judging from Indian pictographs found on the ceiling of the cave, along with potsherds and flint chips and bits of charcoal, this cave had been populated in prehistoric times.

Chihuahua Charlie was busy diamond-hitching the packs on the mule which carried his grub supply. Hatfield's rations for tonight were waiting for him, the others having eaten their evening meal while Hatfield was out on guard duty.

Boone, busy currying down Geronimo, was with the horses at the rear of the cavern. The Pecos Kid and Naco Red were avoiding Hatfield's gaze, busy saddling up the mounts they would be riding tonight. Karl's death had profoundly shaken these two.

Chihuahua Charlie gestured to the plate of food he had left out for Hatfield. Seeing the grave look on the red-headed newcomer's face, the wrinkled old Mexican laid a hand on his arm and said in the gentlest of voices, "Do not be seek at heart, amigo mio. Remember thees: eef Karl was sneaking up on you, Sleem, eet was to keel you. Eet was not as eef you keeled one of your compadres accidentally tonight."

Hatfield thanked the old Mexican in a choked voice which, he hoped, conveyed the proper note of gratitude. He mumbled in a voice loud enough to carry to the others at the far end of the grotto, "It's rough, cutting down one of my own saddle pards. I didn't bear Karl any grudge for what happened tonight."

Chihuahua Charlie picked up the lead rope of his packmule and headed out through the cavern mouth, to tie the animal up to a cottonwood bole outside.

For a moment, the old Chihuahuan cook stood in the thick shadows under the trees, listening to the soft sough of the breeze rustling the leaves overhead, the lap-lap of river waters against the mudbanks out beyond the tules.

Then, with a furtive glance in the direction of the lantern light spilling through the cavern mouth, making sure no one had followed him outside, Chihuahua Charlie whipped his serape tighter about his shoulders and, ducking low, headed off along the base of the cutbank until he came to the flattened-down tules where Karl Kesselring's body had tumbled down from the cutbank twenty feet overhead.

MAKING his way to the trampled tules where he had seen Hatfield stoop to pick up Kesselring, the old Mexican paused a moment, keening the night for a sound he expected to hear.

Then it came, above the papery rustle of the tules and the remote croak of bull-

frogs somewhere down the river, the stertorous breathing sounds of a human being, somewhere near at hand, pulling tortured breaths of air into his lungs.

A smile bent the puckered lips of the old cookeree. His hand slid under his shirt, fingers coiling over the bone-handled *cuchillo* he kept in a scabbard slung around his neck by a rawhide thong. He had known instinctively what happened out here.

taken a few minutes ago, toting Kesselring toward the river.

He had crossed himself piously when he had heard the big splash out in the river. The Pecos Kid and Naco Red had cursed under their breaths, hearing that splash. And Boone had commented hoarsely, "It couldn't be helped. Karl had it coming, jumping Hannigan."

But Chihuahua Charlie had not been deceived. He *knew*.

"Must be a storm coming up."

Swiftly, with a Comanche's stealth—and Chihuahua Charlie was one-quarter Comanche himself—the old man slithered off through the tules, making in the direction of that sound of a man's labored breathing.

The wind shifted, obliterating the sound, but Chihuahua Charlie knew where he was going. He had but to follow the shadowed lane through the tules, marking the path Slim Hannigan had

He was still fifty feet from the river, where Hannigan had presumably hurled the dead man into the pool, when he came to Karl Kesselring's sprawled figure, lying face up in the tules, completely hidden from view from any point a dozen paces away.

Kesselring's chest rose and felt to his measured breathing. His shirt had been torn almost off his back by his tumble down the cut bank, and his heartbeats

were visible, pounding the rib-slatted cage of his chest.

Kesselring's eyes were open, heavy-lidded, insensible. But he was rallying to his senses, and if he came to, Chihuahua Charlie knew his first groan would reach Boone's ears and Slim's secret would be out.

Chihuahua Charlie studied Kesselring's blood-grimed face for several minutes, remembering how many times he had been abused by this surly outlaw, the many insults Kesselring had cast at his metizo blood, the sadistic practical jokes which had humiliated the old cook for so long a span of time.

In Spanish, the cook whispered down to the man he hated so virulently: "This evening, Señor Karl, you asked me who I sharpened my knife for? It is a more merciful end than you deserve. But the Rangero, he saved my life, and now I save his. A pity you are not awake to know, eh?"

The starlight glinted on the rows of shiny crossed-saber cavalry buttons on Kesselring's shirt, like bulls-eyes pinpointing a target. The starlight glinted also on the silver-bright blade of the fine-honed weapon Chihuahua Charlie lifted from its sheath under his shirt. It was a sure and silent weapon.

Back under the cottonwoods where he had tied the mule, Chihuahua Charlie thrust his knife repeatedly into the soft earth, finally wiping it clean on a handful of cottonwood leaves. He was busy rechecking the diamond hitched packs on the mule when Brandy Boone came out of the cavern, leading Geronimo and the saddle horse he would be riding tonight.

At his back came Naco Red with his two horses, followed by Slim Hannigan and the Pecos Kid leading their mounts. It would be Chihuahua Charlie's duty to take care of Kesselring's two saddlers as well as the packmules and his own horses.

"This place," Naco Red remarked, "I hope I never see it again."

Another ten minutes saw them in saddle, quitting the vile-smelling cavern of grim memory for the last time. In single file, as silent as Kiowa warriors who had paced this riverbank trail in bygone times, the outlaw cavalcade flanked the river until they reached a break in the south bank which enabled them to reach the level of the prairie floor.

AHEAD of them was a three-day's ride to New Mexico. The machinery of The Ramrod's plans was already in motion, here and now. Boone reined up, surveying his men thoughtfully, trying not to look at the horse with the empty saddle which brought up the rear with Chihuahua Charlie's two mules.

"Men, we're splitting up here, sort of," he broke news which came as a surprise to his henchmen. "The Ramrod wants me to plant a couple of men at Colonel Britton's ranch to size things up in advance, before the rest of us show up from the west posing as Santa Fe traders."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the breathing of the horses and the creak of saddle leather.

"Split up?" demanded Naco Red, fearing another burden of *segundo* duty was about to descend on his shoulders. "Why?"

Boone said, "The Ramrod has learned that Colonel Britton is short-handed for this drive coming up, what with the Kansas cattle drives in full swing this time of year and drovers hard to come by. So, he knows if two of us ride in looking for range work, Britton will hire us pronto prontito. The real idea is for two of us to spy out the situation in advance, sizing up the condition of the horses, the J Bar B crew and so on."

Boone paused, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "Ridin' in from my talk with The Ramrod in Tascosa this week," he went on, "I had made up my mind to send you, Naco, and Karl Kesselring. But in view of Karl's bad luck, I've got to pick a substitute. It can't be me and I'd rather it wouldn't be Charlie, for fear Britton might already have a cook and wouldn't want to hire anybody as old as Chihuahua is."

Naco Red shrugged. "That leaves Slim

and Pecos, then."

The Pecos Kid said instantly, "I'm pretty old and stove up myself, same as Charlie. Let the kid go with Naco, boss. He's young and husky, more apt to be hired."

Boone turned to Slim Hannigan. He said, "I'd already picked you, Slim. I think you'll feel easier, not joggin' along the trail for three days with Karl Kesselring's empty saddle starin' you in the face. Okay by you, ridin' up to J Bar B with Naco?"

The taciturn red-head lifted his hand in a gesture of indifference, in keeping with the character of the cold-blooded killer he was impersonating.

"Karl's empty saddle don't matter a damn to me, chief. Anything you say."

Inwardly, Jim Hatfield's stomach was churning. Riding over to Colonel Jeff Britton's ranch in the guise of a saddle bum looking for work—that would mean a couple of days from now he would be face to face with the rancher who knew him as a Texas Ranger and an old friend. And to further complicate the situation, what if Linda Lee Sherman happened to catch sight of him riding in with Naco Red—and betrayed his identity? One word from Linda Lee could bring Naco Red's six-gun blazing from holster.

"*Bueno*, then," Brandy Boone said, gathering up his reins. "Naco, you and Slim will follow the river as far as the Bear Grass Crossing, then follow the Tacosa stagecoach road west an' north until you hit the cowtown of Trailsmeet. That's Colonel Britton's base of supply for J Bar B. From Trailsmeet to the home ranch on the Palo Duro, you'll be seeing these horses we'll be pickin' up for Arizona."

Jim Hatfield found himself solemnly shaking hands with the Pecos Kid, Boone, and finally old Charlie, the *cociñero*. The old Mexican, who knew that in the owl-hoot business men could part but not necessarily cross trails again, went out of his way to wish him luck.

"Here ees a good-luck charm, amigo," the old Mexican said, pressing a metal disk into Hatfield's palm. "Eet weel breeng you *buena fortuna*. May your horse never go lame, Señor Sleem, an' keep your shirt on."

Naco Red was pulling away from the others, having a little trouble getting his spare saddle horse to follow. Hatfield spurred after him, trailing the blue roan he used as an extra mount. The horse he was forking now, a deep-chested sorrel, reminded him, colorwise, of his own magnificent stallion, Goldy, whom he had left stabled in Austin. As Captain McDowell had pointed out, a convict fresh out of prison would hardly be riding a beautiful animal like Goldy—and besides, Goldy was too well known in certain quarters as the Lone Wolf Ranger's mount.

A FEW moments later, trailing after Naco Red, Jim Hatfield hipped around in saddle to see that the Texas chaparral had already engulfed Brandy Boone, the Pecos Kid and old Charlie. They would be riding due west to the New Mexican line before turning north toward Colonel Britton's spread.

He moved up alongside Naco Red's stirrup and the two of them spurred their horses into a jog-trot. As long as they had the looping course of the Red River at their right they knew they were heading in the right direction.

Hatfield discovered that he was still holding in his hand the metal disk which Chihuahua Charlie had given him for good luck. He was on the verge of tossing it away, and then through some sheer caprice of will he thrust it into his shirt pocket. He was genuinely fond of old Chihuahua; the *viejo* was the only outlaw in Brandy Boone's gang of cutthroats whom the Lone Wolf would regret putting behind bars, when this case was finished.

He was jogging along through the night, trying to get his mind off Linda Lee Sherman, when, like the delayed-action fuse on a keg of blasting powder, his memory reverted to Chihuahua Charlie's parting admonition—"keep your shirt on."

That idiom was Yankee slang, gringo talk, not Mexican. Had Chihuahua Char-

lie been warning him, in a very literal sense, to keep his shirt on—not allow Naco Red to see the scar, shaped like an inverted question mark, which might tip him off that Slim Hannigan was actually a Texas Ranger?

By association of ideas, Hatfield thought again of the good-luck charm the Mexican cook had slipped into his hand, almost secretively, there at the moment of parting. In the darkness, he had assumed it was a coin of some sort, such as superstitious Chihuahuans often carried, or perhaps a holy medal that had been blessed by some padre.

Reaching into his pocket, Hatfield took out the good-luck piece, feeling it carefully. It was too thick for a coin, but its shiny brass surface glinted pale yellow under the stars. On one side of the disk had been attached a tiny wire loop, to which clung what felt like strands of fiber, perhaps threads.

Why, thought Hatfield, it's a button. Now why would Chihuahua hand me a button for good luck—

And then, as the sensitive tips of his fingers examined the raised design on the other side of the button, he got his answer. The design was that of crossed sabers, the emblem of the United States Cavalry. This button had been removed from the uniform of a cavalryman.

Sweat broke from Hatfield's pores as he remembered the last time he had seen a man wearing a cavalry shirt with shiny crossed-sabers buttons on the pocket flaps. *Karl Kesselring.*

Hatfield knew the truth, now. The only way Chihuahua Charlie could have obtained one of Kesselring's shiny brass buttons was to have stumbled over the outlaw lying unconscious out there in the tules tonight. Chihuahua had used his bowie knife to snip off that crossed-sabers button.

There isn't a shade of doubt, Hatfield thought, that he used that knife to finish Karl off. Handing me this button was to let me know that Kesselring was dead, that he had done what I couldn't bring myself to do. I was right in thinking that Chihuahua was wise to the fact that I'm a Ranger impersonating Slim Hannigan after he saw the scar on my back.

If Chihuahua Charlie betrayed him to Brandy Boone, Jim Hatfield knew Boone would drop him with a bullet at the first opportunity. But what if Chihuahua kept his lip buttoned?

In any event, the Lone Wolf told himself grimly, he was in too deep to back out now. He would either wind up dead —or with The Ramrod as his prisoner, dead or alive.

CHAPTER VII

Disaster in Trailsmeet

AT SUNDOWN two days later, Naco Red and Jim Hatfield rode into the Panhandle cowtown of Trailsmeet, county seat of Palo Duro county where Colonel Britton had his ranch.

Behind them was better than a hundred and fifty miles of steady riding, sleeping as much in saddle as they had in their dry camps. That they had covered so much country was due to the northern Texas plains being table-flat and at this season of the year, they had experienced no difficulties in fording such creeks and rivers as lay in their path.

They had conversed but little during the horseback journey. To Hatfield, it seemed that Naco Red had turned sullen and indrawn, if not outright hostile, and he could only attribute it to a possible resentment over Karl Kesselring's death.

Something's eating on the jigger, anyway, Hatfield decided, and was forewarned to watch his every move and word. Old Charlie, the cook, had eased his mind about Kesselring's reviving and causing future trouble, but had given him a thinly-veiled warning to beware of Naco Red.

Trailsmeet was a dreary plains town, its tick-tack-toe pattern of streets centering on a courthouse plaza, faced on four sides

by the false fronts of stores, liveries and honkytonks catering to Chisholm Trail drovers.

Some enterprising civic leader a few years back had prevailed upon the storekeepers and saloonmen to give their buildings a coat of white paint, which now resembled the crowded teeth in a skull when viewed by sundown light.

This was the town Jim Hatfield had heard Linda Lee speak of so disparagingly, a town without church or school but thirteen saloons and bagnios.

They stabled their horses and learned from the hostler that their destination, Colonel Britton's ranch house, was another ten miles further west. Since they had made such good time on their overland passage, they decided to spend the night in Trailsmeet, resting up, and head for J Bar B in the morning.

Their first port of call was a barber shop and bath house where they spent an hour soaking the trail dust out of their hides. When Naco Red suggested shaves and haircuts next, he unknowingly gave Hatfield a bad couple of minutes. The Ranger couldn't risk letting a cowtown barber work on his hair and discover it had been dyed red.

"While you're getting slicked up," Hatfield evaded the issue without making his trail mate suspicious, "I'll rattle my hocks over to the mercantile and lay in some extra levis and socks. Might be my last chance this side of Santa Fe."

It was Hatfield's first opportunity to be alone since he had joined the wild bunch in Villa Acuña. Leaving Naco Red drowsily comfortable under towels at the barbershop, Hatfield paid a brief visit at a nearby mercantile and then made a beeline for the local Overland Telegraph office.

There, he composed an innocuous-sounding telegram for a Mrs. Bertha Allison in Austin, assuring her he was well, was writing her a long letter, and wished her a happy birthday. He signed it, "Your son, Red."

"Mrs. Bertha Allison" was a code address in the state capitol. Tomorrow morning, Ranger Captain Bill McDowell would find Hatfield's message on his desk and know that the Lone Wolf Ranger was now in Trailsmeet, Texas.

That errand finished—McDowell's last message from Hatfield had been dispatched from Del Rio a month ago, just before he had crossed the river to Villa Acuña to look up Brandy Boone—Hatfield paid a quick visit to the Trailsmeet post office. There he composed a short note to Captain McDowell, written in code, informing his superior that The Ramrod intended to rob a thousand head of horses from Colonel Jeff Britton and sell them to the army over at Fort Bowie, Arizona, with the help of Brandy Boone and his outlaw henchmen.

When that message was in the mails, addressed to the same fictitious Mrs. Allison in Austin, the Lone Wolf breathed

A TALL TEXAS TALE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

THREE hunters in the Texas backwoods country some years ago were stranded, out of food, and had only one rifle cartridge left. They drew lots for it, and the winner set off looking for game.

He hadn't gone far when he was surprised by two ferocious wolves. He turned and raced for the tent, and just as he reached it the wolves sprang at him. He quickly stepped to one side, and the animals went hurtling through the tent opening.

Hurriedly closing the flaps, the hunter shouted to his companions: "Start cutting up those two while I go looking for more!"

—Al Spong

easier. Now, in case anything happened to him and he wound up in an unmarked grave somewhere, the Rangers would at least know The Ramrod's horse-thieving plans, if not his identity.

Hatfield got back to the barber shop, toting his new pair of Levis in a paper sack tucked under his arm, just as Naco Red was climbing down from the chair, redolent of bay rum, his shaggy rust-colored locks cropped close to his skull.

"It's too early to look up a poker game," Naco Red said. "What say we eat, book ourselves a bunk in the Drover's Hotel yonder, an' be all set to paint the town red?"

Jim Hatfield okayed Naco Red's suggestion about getting on the outside of some supper and engaging themselves a hotel room for the night, but vetoed painting the town red at Trailsmeet's various honkytonks.

"How come?" sneered Naco Red. "If Slim Hannigan was tough enough to get into San Castro *juzgado* for five years, why so particular about gamblin' and flirtin' with the fancy gals now? Turnin' over a new leaf? Goin' straight?"

JIM HATFIELD felt a tingling sensation going down his spine, pricking at the half-healed knife scratch down his back, under Chihuahua Charlie's bandages. Naco Red was baiting him, probing at him, needling him. Well, if whatever was on Naco Red's mind was going to come to a head, it might as well be tonight, Hatfield told himself.

"It so happens," the Lone Wolf said as they headed down the street from the barber shop in search of a restaurant, "that I had a pretty wide rep on the Chisholm Trail, Naco, before I went to San Castro pen. I'd just as soon not rub shoulders with the trail drivers, not just yet. Too much chance of being recognized and pointed out to the local marshal as Slim Hannigan, the owlhooter."

That explanation seemed to mollify Naco Red for the moment. Turning in at a side-street beanery to order supper—their first meal under a roof since leaving the Rio Grande a month before—they consumed their soup, beefsteak, spuds and coffee in total silence, as if they were two strangers.

When the waitress brought them their slabs of berry pie, however, Naco Red fixed Hatfield with an unblinking, basilisk-like stare which finally brought an angry reaction from his trail pard.

"What in hell's eatin' you lately, Naco? Are you still sore about my accidentally knocking off Karl Kesselring?"

Naco Red's upper lip lifted in a sneer. "To hell with Karl. He was no good. I'm glad he's dead."

"Then what's wrong? If you hate my guts, then come out and tell me so. I didn't pick this job as your trail partner."

Naco Red chewed thoughtfully on his pie crust. Finally he said grudgingly, "I won't go so far as to say I like you or otherwise, Slim. Put it this way. You don't act like a man who's just got out of San Castro penitentiary."

Jim Hatfield's long schooling in trouble kept his face inscrutable, his eyes returning Naco Red's stare without wavering.

"So? How should I act?"

Naco Red reached for a toothpick. "I remember when Boone and Karl were asking you about things at San Castro, on the way comin' up from Del Rio—inquirin' about convicts they'd known, trusties, guards, the warden himself, from the days when they were in prison there—"

"Yes?" Hatfield asked.

Naco Red's great shoulders stirred. "Well, you wouldn't give 'em satisfactory answers. You kept stalling, claiming you didn't remember, claiming you wanted to forget San Castro."

"Yes?" Hatfield's voice was taut, icy, ominous. "Come to the point, Naco."

NACO RED said in a grating undertone that barely carried above the clatter of silverware and china at the front end of the restaurant, "Sometimes I wonder if you *are* Slim Hannigan, the guy whose name was on that warden's release papers you gave Brandy that night in

Villa Acuña."

Hatfield grinned, pretending a mirth he was far from feeling. He had known from the first that Naco Red was the most intelligent member of Brandy's gang, next to Brandy himself. His imposture had been a difficult thing to maintain; a man had to be a consummate actor to assume the personality of a hardbitten character such as Slim Hannigan had been. Somewhere along the line Hatfield had turned in an unconvincing performance, and Naco Red, without being able to put his finger on the reason, had somehow sensed the counterfeit.

"If I'm not Slim Hannigan," Hatfield laughed disarmingly, "who am I, then? You should have expressed your doubts to Boone before we split up."

Naco Red shrugged.

"Hell, you could be anybody who happened to waylay the real Slim Hannigan when he got out of San Castro. Stole his papers, that scrapbook o' press clippings, that letter from The Ramrod."

"But why should I want to pass myself off as Slim?" Hatfield persisted.

The tautness in Naco Red's lips suddenly softened, smoothed out in a grin.

"Reckon I'm gettin' as boogery as Karl was there at the last," the outlaw said, shoving aside his pie plate and starting to twist himself a cigarette. "I ain't meanin' to hooraw you, Slim. Hell, there ain't a chance in the world you ain't who you claim to be. But I keep remembering, we ain't actually got any *proof* that you're who you claim to be. No hard feelings?"

Jim Hatfield's grin was very, very genuine. "No hard feelings, Naco."

Naco Red licked and tapered his quirly and lighted up. With smoke pluming around his face, he said, "Just to show you how a man's mind can work overtime in crazy ways—I can't shake off the feelin' that you didn't salivate Karl Kesselring the other night. That splash in the river—I don't know, Slim, it didn't *sound* like a dead body. Not heavy enough, you know."

Hatfield met the flat strike of Naco Red's gaze, aware that he was still skating on thin ice here. Was it possible that Boone had coached his *segundo* to pry information out of his new man?

"Again I'll have to ask you—why should I have faked the killing of Kesselring?" Hatfield asked. "I hated his guts."

Naco Red grinned and spread his hands. "The story just sounded kind of phoney, that's all. You knew Karl was honin' to bushwhack you for mussin' him up—we all heard him swear he'd git you sooner or later. So I got it figgered maybe you knocked him out and chucked him into the tules on your way to the river that night, not bein' cold-blooded enough to actually murder the hombre."

Hatfield shook his head slowly. "Kesselring is dead," he said positively. "Maybe this will prove it." As he spoke Hatfield tossed the brass cavalry button from Kesselring's shirt onto the table in front of Naco Red. "A little souvenir—"

Hatfield broke off as a shadow fell across their table. He glanced up to see a young woman dressed in a white stetson, silk blouse and leather riding skirt standing at his side, the restaurant lamps putting a halo around her red-gold hair which fell in great clustering ringlets to her shoulders.

Pure shock went through the Lone Wolf Ranger as he found himself staring up into the blue eyes of Linda Lee Sherman of the J Bar B. Eyes that had haunted his dreams for months past.

Before he could flash her a message with his eyes, Linda Lee cried impulsively, "Why, Jim Hatfield! What on earth are *you* doing in Trailsmeet? And since when were you a red-head?"

CHAPTER VIII

Gunplay and Getaway

JIM HATFIELD saw the girl's face respond to the shock of realizing too late that she had, in her exuberant moment of surprise at seeing him, spoken

out of turn. At that instant, both of Hatfield's hands were above table level, away from his guns. But Naco Red's right shoulder lifted and fell as the quick-thinking outlaw lifted a Colt from leather, and in the next instant the Lone Wolf felt Naco Red's gun muzzle jab him on a knee-cap under the table.

Very slowly, Hatfield came to his feet, finding it impossible to force a grin to his lips. In this desperate moment of being exposed as a Texas Ranger to a gunfighter who only a few moments before had admitted being suspicious of his identity, Hatfield's only concern was for Linda Lee Sherman's safety. In the back of his own mind he had already written himself off for a dead man.

"Howdy, Miss Sherman," Hatfield husked out, stiffly formal, his voice showing no sign of the tension which rode him, knowing Naco Red was sitting there holding a gun on him, shielded from the girl's view by the table top. "You're looking fine, ma'am. And how is Colonel Britton's health?"

Linda Lee pulled her frightened gaze off his red-dyed hair, the color receding from her sun-tanned cheeks as she glanced around at Naco Red. The outlaw had not stood up in deference to the girl's presence at the table, and in keeping with the traditional courtesy of the range when in the presence of women. To do so would have revealed the long-barreled Peacemaker clutched in his fist.

"You might introduce me to the lovely lady, Ranger Hatfield," Naco Red drawled, putting a sinister emphasis on the last two words. "I thought you told me you'd never been in Trailsmeet until today." Naco Red chuckled. "Matter of fact, you've told me a lot of things, ain't you, Ranger?"

Hatfield licked his lips. He was careful to keep his hands well away from his guns. Knowing death was but inches away, he wanted the girl anywhere but here.

"This is a rider I met on the trail, Miss Sherman," Hatfield croaked out. "Naco Red, I believe he calls himself. Naco, this is Linda Lee Sherman. Lives on the J Bar B ranch, west of town, the ranch I was telling you we might get work at."

Naco Red grinned up malevolently at the girl. His left hand came up from under the table, gesturing her toward the chair at her side.

"Always happy to meet a friend of Ranger Hatfield's, ma'am," Naco Red said. "Sit down an' chat awhile, can't you? We got quite a few things to chat about, ain't we, Ranger Hatfield?"

Linda Lee swayed, as if momentarily giddy. Her anguished eyes told Hatfield that she realized he was in a predicament of some kind which she could not understand.

"I—I just happen to be riding back out to the ranch with our foreman, sir," she told Naco Red. "I've been in town shopping, and I really can't stay. I was having supper at the corner table when I saw you come in."

Naco Red laughed, but the humor did not reach his eyes.

"Invite her to sit down an' chat a spell, Ranger Hatfield," Naco Red said in a monotone. There was no mistaking the urgency back of those words. They were an order, backed by that cocked six-gun under the table, the muzzle trained point blank at Hatfield's midriff.

Hatfield said, "You better sit down, Linda Lee. Just for a minute. Till I can explain something to Naco here."

Linda Lee thumped down into the chair as if her knees had suddenly turned to rubber. Not knowing what the situation was here, she could find no words to meet it. She knew only that her slip of the tongue had somehow placed this Texas Ranger in extreme danger. She could tell that by his ashen cheeks, the wild despair in his eyes.

"Naco," Hatfield said, keeping his hands in sight on the red-checkered tablecloth as he sat down, "leave the girl out of this. You hold the aces. But deal her out."

NACO RED, to all outward appearance, was a smiling, friendly cowboy fresh off the trail, chatting with old

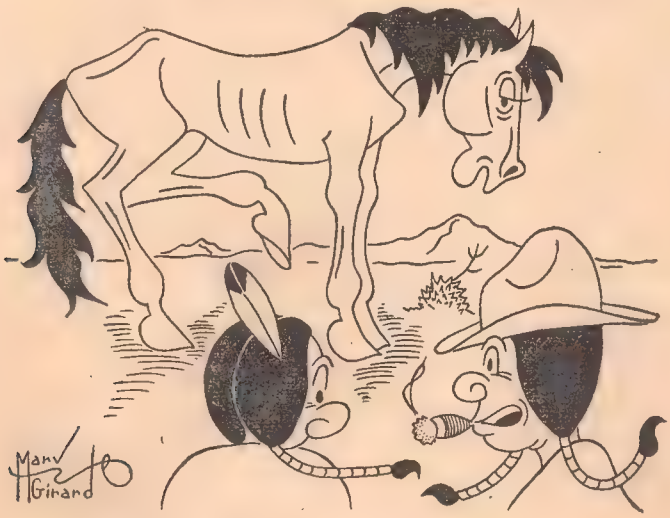
friends. The overhang of the tablecloth masked his right hand, clutching that six-shooter under the table, but Hatfield knew from the way Linda Lee recoiled that he had touched her knee with the Colt muzzle in warning, as he had Hatfield.

"Jim," the girl whispered hoarsely, "what's wrong? I would cut out my tongue if it would do any g—"

Hatfield broke in, his eyes still fixed on Naco Red, "Let her leave, Naco. She's an old friend. She knows nothing about Slim Hannigan."

Linda Lee bent forward over the table, her eyes imploring Hatfield, begging his forgiveness.

The Lone Wolf Ranger said bluntly, "I've got to explain the situation, I guess, Linda. I—I'm working incognito on a case involving The Ramrod. Maybe your guardian told you . . . Anyway, I'm supposed to be a red-headed ex-convict fresh out of San Castro. Naco here rides the owlhoot, Linda. And right now he's got a forty-five aimed at my belt buckle, under the table. Whether he pulls the trigger



"Me make you heap good deal on one owner cayuse,
No wampum down, many moons to pay."

Naco Red's eyes were studying Linda Lee, lascivious lights kindling in their murky depths as he approved the voluptuous swell of her bosom under the silk blouse, the sheen of her red-gold hair, her ripe full lips and the soft column of her throat. She was all woman, a man's woman, and Naco Red had hungry needs to fulfill. But he forced himself to pull his gaze away from the girl and return his attention to Jim Hatfield.

"No dice, Ranger," he said in a sibilant whisper. "I had you pegged and didn't know it. You planted yourself with Boone's outfit and he fell for it."

now, instead of later, depends on how you play your cards."

The girl from J Bar B recovered herself with a visible effort. Her eyes widened as she stared at Naco Red, understanding the significance of that rigid right arm disappearing under the edge of the table.

"What—must I do, Mr. Naco?" she asked in a steady voice.

Naco Red smiled. "I like that," he applauded. "A girl with horse sense. Now you get the set-up, señorita. I just found out my saddle partner ain't an outlaw fresh out of San Castro prison, but the Lone Wolf Rangero. It goes without sayin'

I can't let you walk out of this beanery by yourself, ma'am. You'd bring the local sheriff or marshal or somebody to dab his loop on me."

Linda Lee swung her gaze back to Jim Hatfield. She groped out a hand to touch his wrist, and her fingertips were icy.

"I'm so stupid, Jim," she choked out. "I should have known—you not wearing your badge, your hair dyed red—you were working incognito on a case. But I never thought, I just—"

Naco Red, seeing that the girl was close to tears, interrupted in a harsh undertone, "No blubberin', ma'am. I don't want no attention attracted to this table. Now listen, both of you. It's a long walk to the front door of this hash house, but I got to get out of here, and you two are goin' with me."

Hatfield nodded, watching Naco Red as a hawk might watch a pullet. At the first chance to catch Naco Red off guard, he would make a play for his own guns.

"So we'll work it this way, and listen close," Naco Red continued. "Hatfield and me will stand up. I'll have my gun hid under my hat crown. Miss Sherman, you lead the way toward the street door. Don't say nothin' to anybody. Hatfield, you leave a couple silver cartwheels on the counter up front to pay for our grub, and saunter out. Only keep your hands up high, away from your smokepoles. Savvy?"

Hatfield nodded. He knew there was no way Naco Red would dare disarm him, here in the brightly lighted restaurant, but when they were out on the porch in the darkness, he doubted if Naco Red would give him a chance to get his irons from leather.

"Ready, ma'am?" Naco Red asked Linda Lee, as he lifted his high-crowned stetson off a wall hook with his left hand and, below the table level, placed it over his six-gun. "Just saunter for the door, like nothin' was wrong. Your Ranger friend's life depends on how good an actress you are, lady."

Linda Lee came to her feet, gripping the table edge for support. She was still chalk pale, a pulse hammering violently in the hollow of her throat.

"When we get outside—what then?" the girl asked.

Naco Red came lazily to a standing position, edging his chair back, Jim Hatfield following suit and stepping out from behind the table to join the girl.

"Get movin', lady," Naco Red whispered, holding his stetson against his stomach, concealing the Colt .45. "Act natural, take it easy, nobody's goin' to get hurt."

It was only fifty feet to the door of the restaurant, but to Linda Lee Sherman and the Lone Wolf Ranger—as well as the desperado who stalked at their rear—it seemed more like a mile.

No one paid them any special attention as Linda paid for her own supper, exchanging pleasantries with the Chinese proprietor at the cash drawer. Hatfield placed two silver dollars on the counter and picked up a toothpick, indicating that he was paying for Naco Red's supper and his own.

THE street door was hooked open for ventilation on this humid late-summer night. Outside the street was black as pitch, with lights glowing dimly in the jailhouse at the corner of the courthouse plaza. The hitchracks in front of the restaurant were crowded with cowponies standing hipshot in the dust, their owners, for the most part, patronizing the saloons which bracketed the Chinaman's eatery on either flank.

Linda Lee Sherman was crossing the threshold onto the plank porch in front of Jim Hatfield. The Ranger could almost feel the pressure of the concealed gun muzzle at the small of his back as Naco Red crowded close behind him, practically in lock step.

It was now or never, Hatfield knew. One side step into the darkness and Naco Red would start shooting. His first slug would be for Hatfield; whether he spared Linda Lee Sherman's life or not depended on the outlaw's whim. Then all Naco Red would have to do would be to vault over

the hitch rail, steal any one of a dozen horses, and be gone into the night.

All that could happen in the next ten seconds—

Jim Hatfield moved with the speed of a bursting shell in the next split second. At his back, Naco Red was still inside the restaurant, in plain view of the Chinaman at the cash box, as well as the diners inside. Hatfield was in mid-stride, forking the threshold. Inches in front of him was Linda Lee's back, rigid with terror.

Hatfield was keeping his arms high, away from his gun stocks. His left arm shoved out now with blinding speed, his big rope-calloused palm striking Linda Lee between the shoulders and propelling her headlong into the darkness at the left side of the porch door.

At the same instant Hatfield pivoted and made his rolling dive to the blackness alongside the door on the right.

As he had anticipated, Naco Red jerked his .45 trigger through sheer reflex. Boreflame spat through the hole in the crown of the outlaw's sombrero, but the bullet drilled its sightless path through space which Hatfield's body had occupied a shaved clock-tick before.

The lamplight spilling through the open door caught the fuming smoke which erupted from Naco Red's hat as he discarded the bullet-perforated hat and came charging past the door frame, thumb cocking the .45 for a second shot as he swung his gun in the direction he had seen Hatfield's body vanish.

At that instant Linda Lee Sherman's sprawling body was just striking the floor of the porch, so incredibly brief had the time span been since Hatfield's out-thrusting arm had bowled her out of danger's path.

Falling, she turned her body to look behind her, in time to see Naco Red's silhouetted shape lunging at a low crouch from the doorway. And she was in time to see Jim Hatfield rolling over and bounding to his feet with catlike grace, lamplight flashing on out-darting steel as the Lone Wolf Ranger got his Colts from scabbard with blinding speed.

Flame gouted from the muzzles of Hatfield's guns. Converging lead, traveling only inches, crashed into Naco Red's lunging body and halted the forward rush of the outlaw's two hundred pounds of bone and brawn, like the slap of a giant's fist.

Blood spurted. Naco Red's sixgun tipped upward, his trigger finger convulsing on the prong to drive a second bullet through the tarpaper roof of the restaurant awning. He sprawled face forward on the planks, his body lying in the fanwise splash of light from the restaurant.

And then Jim Hatfield was vaulting Naco Red's body, holstering his guns to help Linda Lee up off the ground.

The Lone Wolf went down the porch and walked into the narrow alley alongside the building. He set the girl on her feet and turned to face the doorway where the dead outlaw lay, smoke still ribboning from the bore of the sixgun clutched in one outflung hand.

"Linda Lee," Hatfield gasped out, "there's too much to explain now—I've got to hightail it." He pulled her back into the shadowy maw of the alley. "You're riding out home tonight?"

"Yes, Jim."

"Alone?"

"No. I'm with my f—I'm with Bobby Dallas, Dad's foreman."

"Listen. Don't tell the foreman anything. But explain to your father that I'll be out to see him tomorrow, posing as a red-headed tumbleweed cowpoke. And under no circumstances must he give me away. Savvy?"

The girl nodded. "It was so terribly stupid of me to bellow out your name, Jim. Can you ever forgive me—"

MEN were racing out of the Chinaman's place now, sidestepping the dead man in the doorway. The rank odors of gunsmoke drifted away in the night, as other men came spilling from the saloons on either side of the restaurant, drawn by the crash of gunfire.

"Hate to leave you this way," Hatfield husked out, "but it's got to be. See you tomorrow."

Before Linda Lee Sherman could speak again, the Lone Wolf Ranger had vanished down the alleyway.

At the far end of the alley he paused, looking right and left to orient himself. The best thing he could do now was reclaim his horses at the livery they had visited upon entering Trailsmeet this evening, and hightail it out of town.

He heard a man's voice shouting Linda Lee's name, and he heard the girl answering, "Bob, over here, Bob. I'm not hurt."

That would be Bob Dallas, the J Bar B foreman, Hatfield assumed. He ducked around the rear corner of the adobe saloon adjoining the Chinaman's and ran for the livery stable.

The shooting down-street had sucked humanity from every building in town. In the confusion, Hatfield knew he could get out of Trailsmeet without attracting attention. He doubted if anyone could identify Naco Red. His main worry was for Linda Lee; she would be hard put to explain her part in the gunplay, without revealing his identity as a Ranger.

The livery barn was deserted. Hatfield saddled up one of the two horses Brandy Boone had provided him and spurred away into the night, leaving the other horse to settle his bill with the absent hostler.

He pulled up a mile out of town, hearing the din of excitement across the distance. His cheeks ballooned with relief as he took his first relaxed breath since Linda Lee had called him by name.

He doubted if the news of tonight's killing would reach Brandy Boone and the others, but there would be some explaining to do when the outlaw boss discovered that his new recruit, Slim Hannigan, had arrived at J Bar B minus Naco Red.

The only good thing out of this debacle, Hatfield told himself ruefully, was that his arrival at Colonel Britton's ranch tomorrow morning would find the old ranchman forewarned of his coming. At least his disguise would not be revealed at the J Bar B bunkhouse, and even with Naco Red out of the deal, the Ramrod's spectacular horse-thieving project would carry on.

CHAPTER IX

Courier from Fort Riley

BOB DALLAS, foreman of the J Bar B ranch, hipped around in saddle to regard the red-headed stranger who had ridden out from town this morning to apply for a range riding job.

"Ordinarily," the clean-cut young straw boss grinned, "I do the hirin' and firin' for the Colonel, because he is very rarely at home. And lord knows we're short-handed for this trail drive we've got comin' up to Fort Riley, Kansas. But in your case, stranger, I've got to refer you to the Colonel himself. He's expecting you."

Jim Hatfield met Dallas' grin with one of his own.

"He told you my name—or rather, Linda Lee did?"

Dallas shook his head. He was a husky young range boss, around twenty-five, hard and competent and easy-going.

"I just guessed that you were the hombre who gunned down the desperado who tried to kidnap Linda in town last night. She told me she'd promised you a job on J Bar B, and your red hair fits the description she gave of you."

Relief touched Hatfield, and a secret pleasure. Linda Lee had not told her foreman that he was a Ranger, then. While he instinctively liked Bob Dallas at first meeting, and believed he was a man to ride the river with, he had to remember that he was supposed to hire on at the J Bar B crew as a renegade spy.

"You'll find the Colonel over at the main house," Dallas said. Later, when you're chucking your bedroll in our bunkhouse as a member of the crew, I'll get around to telling you how much I appreciate what you did for Linda Lee last night. It's all very mysterious, some renegade trying to kidnap her, but all that

really matters is that you were able to save her."

Hatfield picked up his reins and spurred away from the big corral where he had encountered the J Bar B foreman. The corral was of prodigious dimensions, actually nearly a square mile in size and more a fenced-off grazing area than a corral.

Inside it was one of the largest concentrations of horseflesh Hatfield had ever seen in his life. Horses of solid color only, hundreds of them—bays, sorrels, duns, blacks, grays, roans, whites, buckskins—all as much of a size as if they were toys from a common mold. A thousand of them, according to Brandy Boone's advance information, worth perhaps forty dollars a head on the open market, but contracted for by the remount officer at Fort Riley, Kansas, for five times that amount.

Jogging along the whitewashed fence toward the big two-story, cupolaed Victorian mansion which was Colonel Britton's ranch home, Jim Hatfield found himself thrilling inwardly at the sight of this pool herd, collected from all over northern and central Texas and massed here at the J Bar B. A fifth of a million dollars' worth of horse flesh for Uncle Sam's cavalry—and this very morning, a fake courier from Fort Riley, Kansas, was due on J Bar B to give Colonel Britton counterfeit orders to turn the big horse herd in the opposite direction, toward Arizona.

He reined up in front of Britton's home and before he had finished his tie, heard Linda calling his name and saw her and the white-haired, white-goateed old politician and ex-soldier coming down the porch steps to greet him.

He would like to have taken Linda into his arms and kissed her, but she gave him no opportunity. Or rather, bluff old Colonel Jeff Britton prevented any such display of affection. Florid-faced with suppressed excitement, Britton seized Hatfield's hand and pumped it as vigorously as he had down at the governor's meeting in Austin a month or more ago.

"What's this Linda tells me about you posing as an outlaw named Slim Hannigan, Jim?" Britton asked, brushing aside the young Ranger's greeting. "What preposterous nonsense is this?"

Across the Colonel's shoulder, Hatfield's eyes locked with Linda Lee's. She said demurely, "You might as well go into your inner sanctum and talk this thing out, Dad and Jim. Jim, we'll get around to—having our own visit later. Dad's been beside himself with curiosity ever since I told him what happened in Trailsmeet last night."

A few moments later Hatfield found himself behind locked doors in Colonel Britton's private office, its walls lined with bookshelves, oil paintings and mounted heads of game. In his time, the old Colonel had been a noted sportsman as well as cavalry officer, a hobby which advancing years had forced him to taper off.

Seating himself in front of Hatfield as soon as he had made the young Ranger comfortable in a deep-cushioned chair with a glass of fine imported brandy, Colonel Britton got straight down to business.

"Now. Tell me, what's all this about Linda Lee being kidnapped in town last night, and you shooting down her abductor? And your dying your hair red and posing as an outlaw named Slim Hannigan, and being on your way to apply for a job on my ranch? What's it all about?"

Eyeing Britton over the rim of his brandy glass, the Lone Wolf Ranger said quietly, "You were at the governor's conference in Austin—you knew I had been assigned the job of tracking down the Ramrod."

Britton nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes, yes. But what has that to do with this silly disguise of yours, this business of you coming up here to apply for work on my ranch?"

Hatfield went on, "You knew that Captain McDowell got word from the warden of San Castro prison that this Hannigan convict had been killed and a letter from the Ramrod was found in his possession."

Britton shook his head and broke in. "I knew nothing of the sort. Roaring Bill

never confides his plans in me or anyone else, including the Governor. Who is Slim Hannigan, why are you impersonating him, and confound it, why was my ward, Linda Lee, almost kidnapped last night?"

Very patiently, Hatfield described his joining up with Brandy Boone's outlaw band, their secret trek across Texas to the cavern hideout on the Red, and how The Ramrod had met Brandy Boone in Tascosa, through the help of a go-between named Dixon who was a deserter from Fort Riley, Kansas.

THROUGHOUT his recital, Colonel Britton had been listening with growing agitation and concern. Hatfield wound up his narrative with a laconic, "Boone got back and told the gang to ride west with him, as per The Ramrod's orders. Naco Red and I were to establish ourselves on your ranch as riders. But when Linda Lee saw me and blurted out my name, Naco Red realized I was a Ranger assigned to ferret out The Ramrod, so it was I he was kidnapping, not Linda Lee."

Britton got to his feet, mopping his balding forehead with a handkerchief. His hands shook as if from palsy and his eyes held a wild glare as he choked out, "But what's The Ramrod planning? Could it—could it possibly have anything to do with the horse shipment I'm making to Kansas?"

"The trail drive to Fort Riley that Bob Dallas was telling me about?" Hatfield said. "That's possible. I'm just a buck private in the ranks of The Ramrod's army, though. If Brandy Boone knew what the Ramrod was planning, he didn't pass it on to lowly underlings like Naco Red and myself."

Britton began pacing the floor, sweat pouring from his skin. Hatfield settled back in the comfort of the chair, sipping the brandy and relaxing, his eyes never leaving the old Colonel.

"Where," he asked suddenly, "is this Brandy Boone fellow? You say there were five in the party besides yourself, and that one was killed. Where is Boone?"

Hatfield shrugged. "On a guess, I'd say he's on the west side of the Texas line, camping out. He'll be along later this afternoon, if plans work out, though. Accompanied by his old Mexican cook and an owlhooter named Pecos Kid."

Britton stared down at the Lone Wolf Ranger. "These—these known outlaws, why haven't you arrested them, if you know they are outlaws? Why let them congregate here, using my ranch as a decoy for whatever The Ramrod is cooking up?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Colonel. I don't reveal my hole cards until Brandy Boone has led me to The Ramrod. You were at the Governor's conference. You know that's the big fish we're trying to hook—not minnows like Boone."

The J Bar B boss stopped his fidgeting long enough to pour himself a snifter glass of brandy from his big decanter.

"I've faced hostile Indians on the warpath," the oldster said, panting, "and I've clashed sabers in battle with the enemy. I've smelled my share of blood and cannon smoke. Up to this moment, Jim, I've fancied myself a brave man. But I confess it curdles my belly to know that The Ramrod—this scourge of the Lone Star State—may have designs on me and my neighbors' pool herd."

Outside the private library, Hatfield heard Linda Lee's steps crossing the outer room. A moment later her knock sounded, rousing her guardian out of his black slough of thought.

Unbolting the door, Britton snapped testily, "I told you I didn't want to be disturbed, honey, while Hatfield and I were—"

"But Dad, this is important. You've got a visitor."

Britton half closed the door in Linda Lee's face, his face turning ashen as he swiveled around to stare at Hatfield. His lips formed a soundless name, "Brandy Boone?"

Hatfield grunted. *"Quien sabe?"*

Britton turned back to Linda Lee. Who is it?"

"A sergeant from Fort Riley, Kansas.

A dispatch bearer with urgent messages for you, he said."

Jim Hatfield's heart raced as he saw The Ramrod's hand moving events, as might invisible fingers moving pawns on a chessboard.

"Ah. Send him in, send him in," Britton said. He turned to Hatfield, beaming again, his old ebullient self. "Final confirmation of my horse deal with the military, I presume. A big operation, Jim. A thousand head of—"

"Don't," Hatfield warned, "tip off this army messenger who I am. The less who know I'm a Ranger the better."

CHAPTER X

Ramrod's Orders

OLD BRITTON nodded, his ear cocked to the sound of a soldier's brisk bootsteps outside. "Of course, Jim, of course. I know your passion for anonymity. No need to introduce you to this courier at all."

He opened the door to reveal a tall, spare cheeked man clad in the blue and gold uniform of a cavalryman, with a sergeant's stripes on his sleeves. Slung over one shoulder was an official army dispatch case of shiny brown leather. Behind the courier was the Colonel's foreman, Bobby Dallas.

"Boss," Dallas said, "this is Sergeant Matt Stone of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment up in Fort Riley, where we're selling the horses. He has a mesage from the commanding officer up there."

Sergeant Matt Stone snapped to attention, clicked his heels and lifted an arm in grooved salute.

"The Colonel's compliments, sir, and a sealed dispatch for your immediate attention." As he spoke, the courier snapped open his dispatch case and drew out an official-looking envelope heavy with sealing wax. He handed it to Colonel Britton, executed a smart about-face and stepped back to the door-way.

"At ease, soldier," Colonel Britton mused, ripping open the envelope. In the background, Jim Hatfield studied the courier with keen interest. Here, before his very eyes, was the Ramrod's go-between who had brought the mysterious outlaw leader and Brandy Boone together over in Tascosa last week. Being a deserter from Fort Riley, the courier's bearing and uniform were authentic, if his mission was not.

Going over to the desk, Britton began reading the message from Fort Riley. Whatever it was, the contents caused the old man to slump into his chair with a groan of dismay.

Bob Dallas leaped to the old man's side, Sergeant Stone unlimbering enough to pay Jim Hatfield a curious glance before swiveling his attention to Colonel Britton.

"Anything wrong, sir?" the foreman asked anxiously.

Britton appeared to recover himself with the help of a swig of brandy.

"Read that," he gasped out. "The Army, damn 'em, have changed the point of delivery for our horse herd, Bob. Fort Bowie, Arizona instead of Fort Riley, Kansas."

Bob Dallas's eyes shuttled over the fake orders from Fort Riley, then he strode over to a large wall map of the United States and made swift mental calculations of distances before swinging around to face his boss.

"Why, it's twice as far to Bowie as it is to Riley!" the J Bar B foreman said. "And I've never been west—"

Colonel Britton groaned. "This is shattering news. That's wild country, Indian country, over in New Mexico. Why, this could kill the whole deal. Where can I get guides at this late date?"

Jim Hatfield grinned to himself, knowing that The Ramrod had taken care of that little detail. Santa Fe guides would be showing up, providentially, this very afternoon.

Britton looked up, spiking Sergeant Stone with his glance.

"Will you spend the rest of the day here, Sergeant, before returning to your post?"

The fake courier saluted. "Sir, I thank you for the hospitality, but my C.O. wants me to return to duty at Riley without delay, sir. I am to bring back an acknowledgement of your receipt of his orders, sir."

Britton, moving as if in a trance, swung his swivel chair around to his desk and took a quill pen from a stand. Ripping a sheet off a pad of note paper, he scribbled several lines, blotted the paper, folded it and placed it in a sealed envelope, which he handed to the blue-clad messenger.

"My compliments to—who is in command at Fort Riley now? Colonel Payton? Tell him that somehow, I don't know how, we'll get those horses to Arizona Territory, Sergeant."

Stone saluted, about-faced again, and stiff as an automaton, marched out of the room. Britton came to his feet, stared at Hatfield a moment as if seeing him for the first time, came out of his blind swirl of thoughts for a moment and said, "Jim, uh, I mean Slim, Bob here will show you where to bunk, where to chow. Come back in an hour and sign the payroll."

Hatfield was being dismissed, and was glad for it. He followed Bob Dallas outside, seeing nothing of Linda Lee around the house, and overtook the foreman out by the hitchrack where the fake Sergeant Stone was tightening the girth of his McClellan saddle. His saddle horse was branded US, Hatfield noticed, and mentally applauded the Ramrod for his attention to detail.

"You're not stopping for chow, Sarge?" Dallas was asking the courier. "We'll be hearin' the dinner triangle any time now."

Stone swung into stirrups, shaking his head. "Thank you, no. I have orders to pick up telegraphic instructions at the nearest town, which I understand is Trailsmeet. Then I will be on my way back to Kansas. Good-bye, sir."

STONE turned his horse—which seemed very fresh and fit considering it was supposed to have just completed a four-hundred-mile journey—and spurred off along the section line which led to Trailsmeet, an hour's ride to the east.

Dallas turned to Hatfield. "The boss hired you?"

"He did," Jim Hatfield said, "for the trail drive to Kansas. But from what I overheard in the Colonel's office, that's been changed to Arizona."

The J Bar B foreman nodded, his brow creasing with worry.

"Yes. How we can make a trail drive of that length, without experienced trail guides, I don't know."

Hatfield said grimly, "I'm quittin' before I even have time to untie my bedroll. I've tangled with them Comanches and Apaches before. No thanks. Red scalps are too popular over west."

Dallas was too preoccupied with his immediate worries to react to Hatfield's words. He saw the redhead untie his horse and step into saddle, curvetting the animal away from the rack.

"Hey," Bob Dallas came to himself. "I didn't get a chance to thank you for saving my girl last night—"

The Lone Wolf reined up with a jerk, his heart pounding.

"Your girl? Are you engaged?"

Dallas blushed brick red. "Well, not exactly. I mean, I've popped the question, and she ain't exactly said yes. But you know women. You can tell when they're leanin' your way. I figure it's just a question of time before she's Mrs. Robert Dallas."

Hatfield felt a rush of emotions sweep through him. Not jealousy, exactly, or even regret; not happiness over this news that Dallas was courting Linda Lee, either. But in Dallas he saw an answer to his own personal problems.

"Congratulations, son," Hatfield said with a sincerity which escaped Dallas. "She's a fine girl, and you're a man worthy of her. Tell her—I wish her every happiness. Adios."

He left J Bar B at a hard gallop, pushing the horse as fast as it could travel along the Trailsmeet road. Strangely

enough, Linda Lee's impending betrothal to another man had been crowded out of his thoughts. His eyes and his full attention were concentrated on the moving plume of dust in the distance which marked The Ramrod's messenger, the spurious Sergeant Stone.

Having come out from Trailsmeet this morning, Hatfield knew the lay of the land, knew the section line road which the courier was following took a right-angled turn not far beyond the brow of the low hill due east of the Colonel's ranch.

Leaving the fenced land, Hatfield veered off the road, taking a short cut up and over the rise of ground which shut off his view of Sergeant Stone.

He was thinking, if I was forking Goldy now, I wouldn't be worrying about letting The Ramrod's messenger get out of my sight—

He topped the rise and was hammering at a dead run down the far slope when he caught sight of the blue-uniformed rider directly below him.

Sergeant Stone, apparently, had changed his mind about heading due east to town. He was cutting south, crowding his horse hard.

But not hard enough. Hatfield had his rifle out of scabbard, its blued barrel glinting in the sunlight as he rode hard at an angle which intersected the fake messenger from Fort Riley at the foot of the hill.

Both men reined up, mild curiosity in Stone's face. He was carrying an Army revolver at his hip but it was in a button-flapped holster and the flap was closed. Sergeant Stone found himself peering into the black bore of a rifle held by the red-headed hombre he had seen in Colonel Britton's office.

"Hey, relax, son!" the army deserter grinned. "We's both workin' for the same boss. You're Hannigan, ain't you?"

Hatfield lowered the rifle, feigning uncertainty. "Yeah—yeah, I am. You're not heading for town, you're circlin' back across the state line to wherever Brandy Boone's holed up, ain't you?"

The courier nodded, reaching out a hand to grip Hatfield's.

"Yeah. My name's Dixon. Boone's told me all about you. Anything you want me to pass along to Boone when I see him this morning?"

Hatfield thrust his Winchester back in scabbard and picked up his reins.

"I'll ride along with you, Dixon. Yeah, I've got plenty to report to Brandy. Naco Red is dead, for one thing. It'll be in that message Britton scribbled off for you. You're taking it to Brandy, not the C.O. up at Fort Riley, of course."

Dixon was suddenly overwhelmed with confusion. He made several stammering attempts to reply, Hatfield finally cutting him off with a soft-voiced bombshell: 'Sure, Colonel Britton is The Ramrod. I've suspected it for some time now, but I've been positive of it for the past hour or so."

The fake courier went ash-white.

"I—I'm not at liberty to say anything about The Ramrod's identity," he choked out. "If the Colonel's message bears The Ramrod's signature—you're guessing, Hannigan. No man knows who The Ramrod is."

Hatfield leaned down to rummage inside his left cowboot. When he straightened, something shiny and quicksilver-bright was in his hand. "Not only will that message be in The Ramrod's handwriting, Dixon, but it will also tip off Brandy Boone that I'm not really an ex-convict named Slim Hannigan, but a Texas Ranger."

Dixon swayed in the saddle, recognizing the glinting metal object in the rider's plam as a Ranger badge.

"You're Jim Hatfield!" said the outlaw. "The Ramrod knew you were assigned to track him down—"

Hatfield snapped his Colt .45 from holster with an almost leisurely motion.

"Let's ride," he said. "I can explain things on our way out to wherever Boone and the rest are holed up. Whether or not you're alive an hour from now depends on how good an act you put on when we join the gang, Dixon."

CHAPTER XI

Guns on the Palo Duro

THE PALO Duro river made a tight S-bend where it snaked over the New Mexican boundary line into the Texas Panhandle, as if the stream's meandering waters recoiled at the prospect of entering the empty reaches of the Lone Star State.

Some time in the past, a homesteader had tried to establish a home in the west bend of the river's S, building a fieldstone shack which matched the government's rock cairn indicating the Texas line only a few yards away. The shack had been deserted long years back, but its tule-thatched roof was still weatherproof and the cabin had provided shelter for passing saddle tramps on occasion.

It served now as the hideout which Dixon had used while helping engineer the forthcoming horse rustling deal for The Ramrod, and it was the camp to which, last night, Brandy Boone and Chihuahua Charlie and the Pecos Kid had come.

Old Chihuauhua Charlie was rustling up a snack of bait at the cabin fireplace, preparatory to the three of them packing up and heading for the J Bar B, a few miles downstream on the Texas side of the line, where they would be passing themselves off as Santa Fe trail experts. The Pecos Kid, sitting at the front window cleaning and oiling his guns, was listening to Brandy Boone brag about what he intended to do with his share of the rustlers' loot.

A sound of hoofbeats caused the Pecos Kid to look up, quickly grabbing the rifle that leaned against the window sill.

"Calm down, Kid," Brandy Boone chuckled, from his seat at the rustic table in mid-room where he was relaxing his nerves over a game of solitaire. "That'll be Dixon coming back from delivering that fake dispatch from Fort Riley."

The Pecos Kid said, "It's Dixon, all right, but he's got Slim Hannigan with him. I thought Slim and Naco were supposed to stay on J Bar B, spyin' for us?"

Chihuahua Charlie spun around from the job of stirring a bowl of stew. Through the door which Brandy Boone opened wide, the old Mexican saw two horsemen spurring up from the riverbank trail, dismounting in front of the rock house.

"Howdy," Brandy Boone called out, as Dixon and the red-head ground-tied their horses and headed for the door. "What brings you away from Britton's spread, Slim?"

Dixon, his face strangely stiff and white, came into the cabin and opened the flap of his dispatch case. Slim Hannigan entered behind him, lifting a hand in greeting to Pecos and old Charlie.

"The Colonel sent you a message explainin' why I'm here, Brandy," Hannigan said. "Hand it over, Dixon."

Wordlessly, Brandy Boone accepted the envelope which the uniformed Dixon handed him from the leather case. Then he froze, in the act of ripping open the envelope. Eyes bulging with sudden disbelief, Boone said hoarsely, "But how would Colonel Britton know we're camped here? We ain't come on stage yet! And Dixon couldn't tell him without betrayin' himself."

The red-head grinned cryptically, gesturing toward Dixon.

"Ask The Ramrod's *segundo* here."

Across the room, Chihuahua Charlie's hooded, rheumy eyes met Hannigan's and a secret intelligence flashed between the two of them, a complete rapport that had its inception in the death of Karl Kesselring over on the Red.

"What kind of talk is this?" Boone demanded. "How would Britton know about me being camped here, Dixon?"

Dixon, his eyes on the rammed earth floor, said in a trembling voice, "Because Colonel Britton is The Ramrod."

For a long moment, Boone stood there, gooseberry eyes mirroring their incredulity at this astounding news.

"Why so startled, Boone?" the red-

head he knew as Slim Hannigan chuckled. "Britton is an ex-Senator, which gives him powerful connections at the capitol. He's always traveling, which fits The Ramrod. He engineered this horse-thieving deal because his political and army pull got him that fat contract over at Fort Bowie, most likely, and after all, he's only rustling about five percent of his own horses. The rest belong to the Co-operative Association, so they'll be pure profit. Of course Britton is The Ramrod."

Boone licked his lips. Then, as if snapping himself out of a trance, he glanced down at the letter he was holding. His lips trembled as he read aloud:

> Boone:
> For God's sake don't ride in this afternoon, things have gone wrong. Naco Red is dead. The man you thought was Slim Hannigan isn't at all, he's Ranger Hatfield and he's sitting right in my office as I write this—

The paper dropped from Boone's shaking grasp and his right hand slapped the hard-rubber butt of his Colt .45. Then he checked the draw, as he saw that the Lone Wolf Ranger had two sixguns out of leather, waiting for showdown.

Hatfield's left-hand Colt covered the Pecos Kid, over by the window. His other gun covered Boone. By shifting it an inch, Hatfield could get the drop on Chihuahua Charlie, if need be.

"Dixon," the Lone Wolf ordered crisply, "dehorn the boys and toss their hardware over here at my feet. We're all going to settle down cozy-like and wait for Jeff Britton to come slam-banging into camp. He's pretty desperate or he would never have written that note admitting he's The Ramrod."

DIXON, his army uniform looking grotesquely out of place in this outlaw cabin, lurched over to the Pecos Kid and took the two six-guns which the old lobo had been cleaning, tossing them on the earthen floor at Hatfield's feet. He had been carefully coached on the ride over as to the role he must play in the Ranger's coup, and was careful to reach behind the Pecos Kid for the rifle which the Kid had hoped to screen from their view. Seeing that, Hatfield knew Dixon did not have the kind of guts it would take to doublecross him.

Over at the table in the center of the room, Brandy Boone stood like a graven image, his brain still stunned by the overwhelming wave of disaster which had engulfed him. Naco Red dead—Slim Hannigan turning out to be a Ranger in disguise—their intended victim Colonel Britton proving to be The Ramrod—these earth-shaking disclosures were too much for Boone to comprehend in one fell swoop.

He stood in that frozen posture as Dixon crossed over to him and lifted his Colts from leather, bringing them over to add to the pile at Hatfield's feet. That done, he headed for the fireplace where old Chihuahua Charlie stood, impassive as a cigar store Indian at this dramatic turn of affairs.

"The cook isn't wearing a gun, Mr. Hatfield," Dixon quavered.

Hatfield nodded. "Charlie's pet weapon, I believe, is a knife. You'll find it under his shirt. Be careful, Dixon. You knew Charlie carried a—"

The sound of a six-gun coming to full cock, somewhere behind and to his right, brought a chill of horror to Jim Hatfield, even before Colonel Jeff Britton's cold voice issued from the open window out of range of Hatfield's vision:

"You will put up your arms, Hatfield, and drop your guns. Boone, get the Ranger's guns."

Screaming an oath of pent-up relief, Brandy Boone lunged across the room to jerk the twin Colts from the Lone Wolf's slowly elevating hands. With Hatfield disarmed, Boone brought up one knee in a sledging blow to the Ranger's solar plexus, the impact of his treacherous attack knocking Hatfield back against the rough rock wall. Darkness swirled about him and he was not conscious of his feet buckling under him, dropping him to a seated position against the wall.

When his senses cleared a few seconds later he was in time to see the Pecos Kid

and Dixon at the doorway, welcoming Colonel Jeff Britton into the hideout shack. Across the room, Chihuahua Charlie had not stirred from his position beside the fireplace.

"Whew! That was the closest call I've had since I hit the owlhoot!" Brandy Boone said, thrusting Hatfield's guns through the waistband of his pants. "Uh, you'll be Colonel Britton, I take it?"

Britton, his cold eyes fixed on the Texas Ranger sitting propped against the wall, nodded. "I am also The Ramrod," the J Bar B boss confessed. "I never thought I would be forced into making that disclosure, but Ranger Hatfield, to give the devil due credit, was able to strip off the mask of anonymity which has been my chief asset from the first."

Britton came over to stand in front of Hatfield, pure distilled hatred simmering in his eyes.

"You could have put me and Dixon under arrest over at the house, in my office, Hatfield. Why didn't you?"

Hatfield said groggily, "My only clue that you were The Ramrod was when you and Linda came out to the front gate to greet me this morning, Colonel. You asked me why I was posing as *Slim Hannigan.* I hadn't told Linda Lee that I was masquerading under that name, or any name. I knew that information hadn't leaked out of San Castro or Captain McDowell's office. So you had to be The Ramrod—whose original recommendation of Slim Hannigan enabled me to join Boone's gang."

The white goatee on Britton's plowshare jaw quivered with the tension the old man was under.

"What became of the true Hannigan—the son of an old army friend of mine?"

Hatfield said, "Slim Hannigan died in San Castro prison. Your letter introducing him to Boone was found on his body. So I assumed Hannigan's identity—by dyeing my hair red—and joined Boone, knowing that sooner or later Boone would lead me to you."

A demoniacal laugh escaped Britton. "So our trails do meet, but it will not be The Ramrod who pays the supreme penalty. It will be the invincible Jim Hatfield, the great lawman himself—"

Brandy Boone came lurching up to stand beside Britton, peering down at the Ranger's seated figure. Boone panted hoarsely as he drew one of Hatfield's six-guns from his belt, "Let me have the pleasure of blowin' his brains out, Ramrod. To think of how I swallowed his disguise, hook, line, sinker an' rowboat—"

Britton hefted the Colt in his own hand. "That pleasure," he told Brandy Boone, "I think I myself have earned, don't you? Hatfield, the moment Bob Dallas told me you had ridden out toward town this morning, I knew the situation was desperate. I knew then that you were aware of my true status, and that you were riding to intercept Dixon. That's why I rode out here to join Brandy. I knew you would show up. I did not, I'll admit, think you'd beat me out here, but you did."

Britton gestured Boone back. The Pecos Kid was grinning fiendishly as he saw The Ramrod raise his gun, lining his sights on Jim Hatfield's chest. Britton was going to blast down his foe at point blank range—

Jim Hatfield came to a squatting position, knowing doom was inevitable. His brain had cleared, the agony had subsided in his bruised stomach muscles. He knew he could never reach the weapons lying on the floor in front of him before Jeff Britton jerked that trigger, but he could die trying.

Very deliberately, Jeff Britton eared back the hammer of his gun. He said with sadistic satisfaction, "We'll be making the horse drive to Arizona as planned, Ranger. We'll—"

From across the room came Chihuahua Charlie's sibilant warning, "Drop the guns, Señor Britton. You are covered—"

Britton stiffened, half turned. He was in time to see the tag-end of the old Mexican's throwing motion as Charlie sent a razor-honed bowie knife streaking through space like a flash of light.

The knife caught The Ramrod's turning figure high on the left chest, plung-

ing hilt deep from the incredible force of the Mexican's expert throw. Before Britton's body could start collapsing, Jim Hatfield had made his pounce for the rifle belonging to the Pecos Kid, knowing the Kid's two six-guns were empty, one of them with a cleaning rod still projecting from its bore.

For a split second, The Ramrod's sagging body shielded the Lone Wolf from Brandy Boone. Diving sidewise, Hatfield was out from under the converging bullets from Boone's borrowed guns. And before Boone could swing his Colts for another shot, the rifle in Hatfield's grasp made its ear-riving thunder.

The .30-30 missile caught Boone between the eyes. As he fell, Hatfield brought the rifle to bear on the only targets remaining in the room, the Pecos Kid and Dixon, the army deserter. But there was nothing to fear from this pair; the Pecos Kid, being unarmed, was not a man to buck a sure gun drop, and Dixon's weapon, while still in holster, had been unloaded for the past two hours.

The interior of the shack was stifling with gunsmoke as the Lone Wolf escorted his two prisoners out into the blazing sunshine, Chihuahua Charlie following him. Without being ordered to do so, the cook had brought along a length of lariat rope which he used to tie Hatfield's prisoners' arms behind their backs. Then he turned resignedly to face Hatfield.

"Charlie, amigo," Jim Hatfield grinned at the old *cociñero,* "you are a much-wanted renegade, with a list of sins a mile long on your record. But none of them are capital sins, so your siesta down in Old Mexico will not be too disturbed by regrets, I don't imagine."

For the first time since he had met the old Mexican, Chihuahua Charlie exposed his toothless gums in a smile.

"You are *mucho hombre,* Meester Hatfield," the cook said humbly. "But I deed not throw the knife at El Jefe to buy my own freedom, *es verdad.*"

Jim Hatfield answered the oldster's grin. "Straddle your bronc, *viejo,* and ride while the daylight holds. Our accounts are square, I think. *Hasta la vista.*"

Jim Hatfield turned back to his prisoners. The Pecos Kid would be accompanying him back to Austin, as the only survivor of Boone's wild bunch; Dixon would face a court martial at Fort Riley for being AWOL. Each in his sphere would get true justice.

But the Lone Wolf was not thinking of these things, or even of the happy chore he had awaiting him in Trailsmeet, that of telegraphing Roaring Bill McDowell that Chihuauhua Charlie's knife had saved the state of Texas the expense of bringing The Ramrod to trial.

He was thinking along the bittersweet lines of what he had to tell Linda Lee Sherman later this afternoon, terminating a romance which should never have been. But realizing that Bob Dallas was around to take his place or perhaps had taken it already, Hatfield had no regrets.

In fact, the polite thing to do would be to let Linda Lee mull it over and decide herself to tell him that no woman in her right mind would even think of marrying a Texas Ranger.

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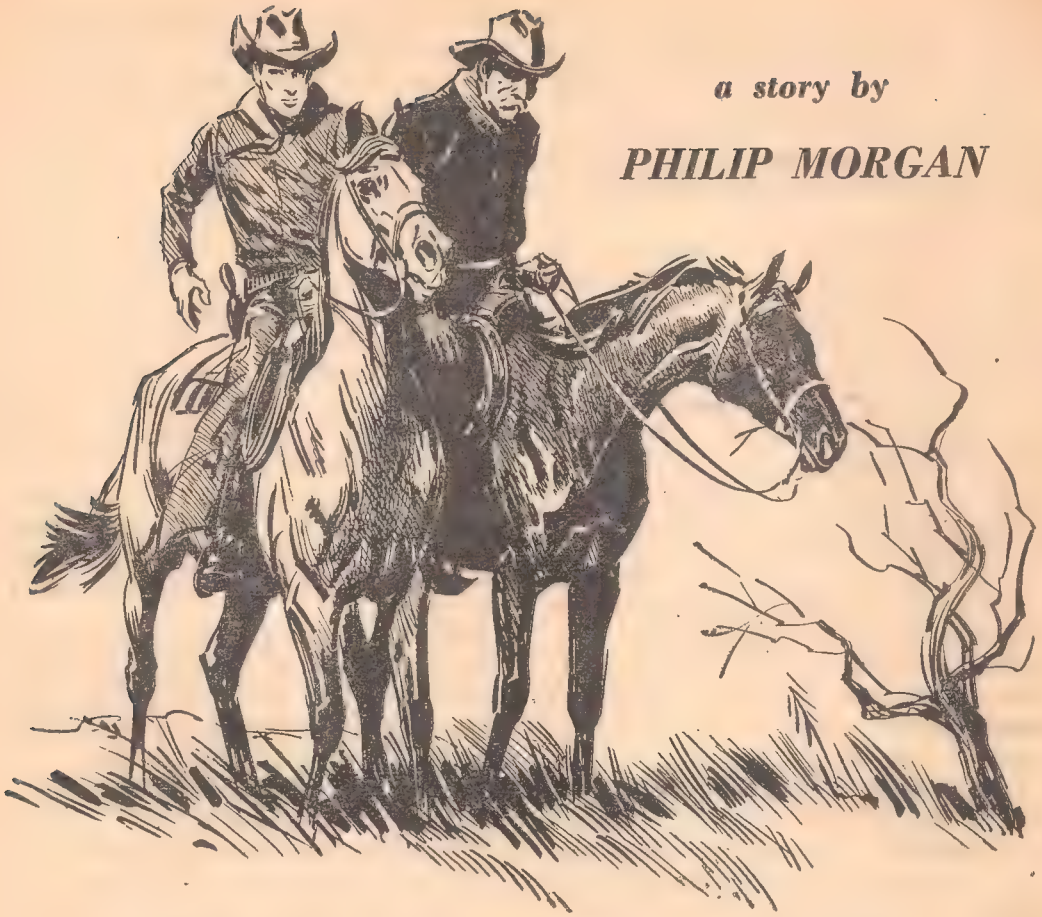

a story by

PHILIP MORGAN

THE LONG DAY

Sometimes a man had to do what he saw to do—

even if the woman he loved would hate him for it

LIN THOMPSON came out of the marshal's office at ten o'clock this October morning and found Antelope's single street already well filled with rigs and saddle ponies. Women and children cruised the sidewalks and the men stood in loose groups under the trees, talking over the recent round-up and lamenting the lack of fall rain. The saloons were doing a good business and south of town on the flats the riders were already competing for prizes in the roping and bronc riding contests.

There was an air of gaiety about the proceedings as the ranchers and their families and hired hands for fifty miles around met for the annual barbecue and dance. It would go on like this for two days, as the people of this lonely land gossiped and talked and ate and drank after the hard work of the summer and the fall round-up.

Lin saw Lettie Parran come into town

with her father and mother. They stopped at the dress shop and both women got down. Lettie went up onto the sidewalk and stood waiting for her mother. Mrs. Parran, a thinly-built woman, talked earnestly with her husband for a few seconds and then joined her daughter and they went into the store.

Bert Parran drove on and as he passed Lin, he waved and grinned, shaking his head. It was an old joke in the country, the way Mrs. Parran always gave Bert a lecture before turning him loose among the wolves. She had been raised in the East by strict Methodist parents and drinking was abhorrent to her. But she fought a losing battle. Bert would get with the boys and swap stories and by the time the band struck up, he would be roaring drunk. Most of the other wives bore this yearly burden with little more than a few acid remarks, but Mrs. Parran fought on alone.

Lin moved down the street, not having seen Lettie for a month and anxious to talk to her. He knew she would be expecting him, knew that she had seen him on the street, although she had given no indication. Such were the devious minds of women. But let him not come to her quickly and she would be angry. It was a game as old as human beings.

But he remembered how her face would light up when she saw him and he remembered the warmth of her eyes when she watched him and knew a deeply satisfying need for her. He was moving along, nodding to friends, sometimes stopping to pass a few words, when he felt the mood of the town change. Even before he turned, he knew that Tom McDougal and his Seven M outfit had come in.

When he looked back, he saw McDougal riding slouched and awkward in the saddle—a saddle tramp from the look of him. Behind him came the twenty riders who made up his crew, the biggest in the valley. McDougal was not liked by the people of this land.

McDougal rode straight down the street, paying no attention to the coldness that came from the groups of men he passed. He spotted Lin and rode that way, his crew turning in at the rack in front of the Fair Lady Saloon. Lin waited for him, smiling slightly.

McDougal reined in and said bluntly, "Come along, Lin. You look like you could stand a drink."

Lin shook his head. "Not now, Mac. Go on and I'll be over later."

"I suppose that Parran girl's in town. Beware of her, boy. She looks like the marryin' kind."

"A man could do worse," Lin said and went on down the street. He was pleased with seeing McDougal, who was an old war horse that Lin greatly admired. He had ridden for the old man for five years before getting the job as marshal here and he knew McDougal better than most.

He knew why the country hated the old man. McDougal was a hard man, with tremendous energy and cold purpose. He amassed an empire and he had held it while lesser men struggled and lost out. There was no bending in him and no softness. But he was honest and fair and he was loyal to his friends. His bluntness and his shrewdness had angered many and his thrift had at first caused envy and then anger in others. But he rode straight down the middle of the road and he stepped aside for no man and Lin admired him.

JUST before he came to the dress shop, Lin saw the Morrison boys, Wes and Pete, ride in. He swore under his breath. If McDougal took on a little too much liquor and ran into them, there could be trouble. But that could wait.

He opened the door of the dress shop and stepped inside and saw Lettie Parran. She had been watching the door, but she turned back to the counter at once and appeared not to notice him enter. Her mother was not in sight, having apparently gone to the fitting room in the back of the shop. Lin came up to the counter beside Lettie, not looking at her.

"I guess Mrs. Franks is busy," he said. "Well, I can come back later."

She swung on him then, her face furi-

ous and he laughed out loud. She colored as she realized she had walked into the trap and then she smiled and shook her head.

"I don't know why I bother with you, Lin Thompson. There are a lot of men in the country that pay some attention to a girl."

He said, "Sure, but none of them are as good looking as I am." He stopped smiling then and said softly, "It's been a long time, Lettie," and took her into his arms and kissed her.

She pushed back in his arms finally and looked up at him. "How long are you going to make a girl wait, Lin?"

"You set the date," he said smiling. "I don't know whether I can support you, but I'll try."

"I already have the date set," she said, laughing at him. "It's November 17th. I'll be twenty in December and if I'm not married every woman in the country will be calling me an old maid."

He said, "All right. Now I've got to get back to work. See you tonight." He walked from the shop, very conscious of her following gaze.

From the dress shop, Lin crossed the street and went along to the Fair Lady. He noticed the Morrison boys' horses tied at the rack and worry touched him briefly. He didn't want any trouble today and Tom McDougal didn't like the Morrisons.

The Morrisons were a tough pair and there was considerable speculation in the country about the amazing number of calves their cows seemed to have. McDougal was certain that they were rustling him, but he had never been able to prove it. But McDougal wouldn't need proof. He had been the only law there was when he came into this country and he killed his own snakes. But now he was older and he was no match for the Morrisons, who had been eying his range ever since they entered the country. It made for an explosive situation.

Coming into the saloon, Lin felt the tightness in the place at once. Wes and Pete stood near the end of the long bar, close together as always, tall, dark, and wickedly quiet, knowing that their presence here was an intolerable irritation for the hard-tempered McDougal. McDougal stood alone further down the bar, standing stiffly, the redness of his neck speaking of the rage that boiled inside him. Lin came up beside him and leaned on the bar.

"I'll have that drink now," he said.

"You took long enough gettin' here," McDougal said, signaling with a finger for the bartender to bring Lin a drink.

"Looks like I'm still in time. Don't be a sucker and walk into a fight, Mac. That's what they're looking for."

"Don't give me advice," McDougal answered harshly. "I've seen more trouble in my time than you'll ever see."

"Never mind, never mind," Lin replied. "How did the round-up go?"

"We were short again. Why don't you quit this fool job and come back to work for me. I ain't got a man worth his salt. They could steal my whole herd and the crew wouldn't know it for a week."

Lin moved his glass around on the bar. "I like the job all right here."

"Yeah," McDougal said slyly, "and besides that girl won't have you workin' for me. She thinks I'm a thief. Well, she's wrong. I took over that pasture north of the river, sure, but it was free graze. Her old man had been usin' it, but he didn't own it. If he didn't want me to take it, he should've run me off."

Lin grinned slightly and shook his head. "That's all there is to it as far as you're concerned, Mac. You always took what you wanted and then despised the man that let you do it. You figured they were all weakings for letting you get away with it. You were wrong. Some of them were as strong as you and maybe stronger. They just figured the land wasn't worth a killing, or a dozen killings. They figured you were like a hog with his feet in the trough and some of them felt sorry for you. But damn few of them like you."

"If that's what you figure, why stand here talkin' to me? Aren't you afraid you'll be contaminated?"

"I'm here because you're a friend of mine. You've made some mistakes and

you've got some crazy ideas about things, but you're square. You never saw anything wrong in the things you did. I'd still be working for you, if it weren't for Lettie. She wouldn't ever have married me, unless I quit you. So I quit."

McDOUGAL poured himself another drink and took it down neatly and wiped the back of his hand across his mustache. He grunted and belched and then said, "You're gettin' almighty wise since you come to town." He paused a long time then, his face suddenly turned quite sober. "Maybe I have ridden a little high in the saddle. What would they feel sorry for me about?"

"I guess some of them figure you never took time out to enjoy life. Just went hammering down the pike raising a big cloud of dust."

"Why did Bert Parran let me take that graze land if he wasn't scared?"

"He's satisfied with what he's got left."

The Morrisons left the bar right then and came over. Lin turned and watched them come up, trying to read what this meant. He didn't like it. There had been the smell of trouble in this room ever since he stepped into it. The Morrisons halted some ten feet away and Wes spoke to McDougal, who had not turned around.

"McDougal, we've got some comin' two year olds we'd be interested in sellin'. We thought maybe you'd want 'em."

Lin cursed under his breath. This was a deliberate thing, a goading of McDougal, who would not be goaded.

McDougal swung around, his face very red and all screwed up as if he was looking into the sun. "I don't usually buy back my own beef, Morrison."

Wes Morrison's face registered an obvious anger and shock, but it was phony. His eyes held a pleased look. Lin knew then what they were doing. He felt a little sick. "Are you accusin' us of stealin' your beef?" Morrison asked softly and then there was not another sound in this room.

McDougal knew what was happening and didn't like it, but he would not back down. He said bluntly, "You got ears."

Lin had been watching Pete Morrison, who had said nothing. There was a cocky assurance about Wes, but Pete showed none of this. He stood, quietly waiting, but his eyes were bleak and deadly and in that one instant Lin knew that the man had used a gun before, that he was dangerous. He felt a chill hit him and knew how tight a thing this was. He said then, "Let it drop, Morrison. There will be no gun play in this town."

Pete Morrison spoke now, "All right, marshal." Then he placed his intent gaze on McDougal. "We will expect you to accommodate us. We will be on the flats at five o'clock. We will expect you to either apologize for the remark or fight."

McDougal shouted, "I'll be there and you better not be."

"Two to one odds is a little strong, isn't it, Morrison?" Lin asked.

"He can bring anyone he wants along to help," Morrison said easily. He turned and walked from the saloon and Wes followed him. Pete's face held no expression at all, but there was a triumphant grin on his brother's thin-lipped mouth.

McDougal's foreman, Charley Yancey, came up and said, "I'll ride out there with you, Tom."

"Thanks, Charley," McDougal replied. Yancey returned to the poker table, making no great show of this thing. He had been riding for McDougal for twenty years and loyalty was something he never thought of. He gave it and expected no thanks.

Lin wheeled on McDougal and his face was set hard and had a pinched look. Anger boiled inside him and he lashed out at the rancher with his voice, but holding it low. "You damned old fool. Couldn't you see they were set for this. They planned it this way."

McDougal said harshly, "Boy, don't be givin' out advice. I've done things one way for fifty years. I ain't changin' now. No two-bit cattle rustler is going to run over me.

"I give up," Lin snapped angrily. "You're a hard-headed, ornery fool. But when you get out there, remember this.

Those two have done this before. I didn't know that until just now. But it sticks out all over them. They've been thinkin' about this for a long time. They figure to knock you over and grab your range."

"Tougher ones than them two have tried it," McDougal said thinly. "Don't be countin' me out. It ain't the fastest on the pull all the time."

"You didn't have to ask for it. You could have played it smart for once."

"I didn't build a ranch by dodgin' the unpleasant jobs, Lin," McDougal said and then he smiled and slapped Lin on the shoulder. "Don't take it so big, son. Everybody dies. The young may and the old must."

"Ah, you make me sick," Lin said bitterly and wheeled about and marched from the saloon. He went on across the street to his office. People spoke to him, but he didn't answer.

He felt the excitement in the town like a breath of a winter storm. And he knew what they would be saying. That McDougal had finally cut it. That the man who had ridden rough shod over so many was finally going to get his

LIN sat behind his desk, his big arms lying full length on the desk in front of him. He kept remembering how McDougal had hired him and kept him on when every other outfit in the country was laying off men. He remembered how McDougal had kept out of the election openly, but had secretly thrown his considerable support behind Lin to get him elected marshal. And he remembered other things. How McDougal was the first one out of his blankets on round-up and the last man down. How he beat hell out of a puncher one day for abusing a horse and how no man on Seven M ever doubted that McDougal and all McDougal stood for were behind him when he was in a jam.

He thought of the Morrisons and read their story easily enough. They had come in and taken a little land along the Seven M line and played it cautiously, waiting for a chance. They waited until they knew the kind of man McDougal was and then they baited him in front of the whole country and led him into a fight that no one could blame on them.

They had played their cards as carefully as a good poker player in a high stakes game. They had gotten it on a personal basis, so McDougal could not ask for help, even if he had wanted. There was an unbending pride in McDougal and they had counted on it. Lin knew now that he had been a fool not to check on the Morrisons when they first rode into the country. But they had appeared to be just another pair of small ranchers with nothing dangerous about them. It was an impression the rest of this country still held, since most of them would be blaming McDougal for the fight.

But in the dead expression of Pete Morrison's eyes Lin had read something else. He had seen a lot of gunfighters in his day and he knew Morrison was one of the breed. He had been a fool not to have noticed it before. The other brother was a vain fool and not much to worry about. But McDougal and Charley Yancey would have no chance against Pete. Yancey had never been good with a gun and McDougal had lost his old skill.

So now he was down to analyzing himself. There was no bending in McDougal and the Morrisons had things just the way they wanted them. And there was nothing Lin could do. He was a peace officer, but his jurisdiction was the town of Antelope. Inside it, he could protect McDougal, whether the rancher liked it or not. But on the flats, Lin was helpless.

Wearing the star, he had a duty to uphold the law and the law said that this fight was none of his business. But McDougal was his friend and he had always stood beside his friends. There was a conflict in loyalties here that cut him and hurt him. For he had a belief in the rightness of the law and of his job that was as strong a faith as he had. But against that, his loyalty to McDougal set up a steady crying against the certainty of the outcome of this fight. And in the end, he knew what he had to do.

He sat in the office, watching the shadows shift along the street as the sun moved steadily west. At four o'clock, he got up and walked from the office. The street held quite a few people and they stood in groups, as they had earlier. But now the feeling was different. There was tension in place of gaiety now. Soberness mixed with animal curiosity and the animal hunger at the smell of death.

To many of these people McDougal had long been a symbol of power and now they waited, most of them without sorrow, for that symbol to fade. And Lin had the fierce hope that they would be disappointed. He stood for a moment, watching the street and then he walked back inside. He unpinned the star and laid it on the desk and wrote a short note of resignation and signed it. Then he returned to the street.

Lettie and her mother would be at the hotel and he went directly there. When he knocked on the door of their room, he was surprised to have Bert's voice tell him to come in. All three of them were there and he knew they must have been talking about the coming fight, because there was an embarrassed silence when they saw him. But Lettie recovered quickly and smiled at him. "Hail the bridegroom. I've told them, Lin."

Bert Parran moved up and shook hands. "Glad you're finally taking her off our hands, Lin."

"Bert," Mrs. Parran said in a shocked voice.

Lin smiled thinly. "Maybe you better hear what I have to say. You heard about the Morrisons bracing Tom McDougal." He watched Lettie and he saw the way her face tightened at the mention of McDougal's name. She was a small girl with an oval face and full lips and her mouth betrayed her feelings. Now her lips went thin and almost bloodless. Bert Parran nodded slightly.

"He has been asking for this for a long time," Lettie said coldly. "I won't feel sorry for him."

Bert Parran said quickly, "Lettie, that ain't a way to talk."

Lin looked straight at the girl. "I came to tell you that I'll be riding out there with him."

LETTIE turned and her face went white and Mrs. Parran gasped. Bert Parran's sharp stare probed Lin's face. "You can't," Lettie cried. "After what he's done, you can't."

"I quit working for him because of you and the way you felt, Lettie. But this is another thing. He and Yancey don't have a chance against the Morrisons."

"He's done it to others. Let him take his medicine." She was close to tears she was so angry and her hands were clenched at her sides.

"It isn't a matter of right or wrong," Lin explained quietly. "McDougal is my friend. If I were in a spot, he'd come on the run. I can't do less."

"Even after what he did to us?" she asked in wonder.

"Quit harping on what he did to us," Bert Parran said savagely. "I let it be done, because your mother couldn't stand the thought of a fight. A man that lays down can expect to get run over."

"I'm sorry about it, Lettie, but it's what I have to do."

Lin turned and started from the room and Lettie's thin voice hit out at him. "If you help him, I don't ever want to see you again."

Lin turned slowly, trying not to show the hurt her words gave him. All three of these people were watching him closely. He said, "Then I'm sorry."

Bert Parran gave out a long sigh and something like pleasure registered on his face. Lin could tell nothing from the expressions of the two women. He left quickly, not looking back.

Coming into the lobby, Lin saw Jack Buchanan, the swamper, and sent him to the livery barn for his horse. He went onto the porch and took a chair and tried not to think. He had been going with Lettie for three years and for at least two of those years it had been understood that they would marry. Losing her left him with an emptiness inside and a sense of

loneliness like he had never before known. He didn't blame her. She hated McDougal and with cause and she could not understand how the man she loved could help him. In her eyes, he was a traitor. Yet, there was nothing else Lin could do. A man stood beside his friends in time of trouble, or he wasn't much of a man from that time on.

At ten minutes to five, McDougal and Yancey came from the Fair Lady. Silence held the town, but every person here was watching this with a strict attention. They mounted and came down the street side by side, two old timers, who had seen a lot of trouble. They rode without looking to either side, as arrogant as cavalry officers on parade. When they came abreast the hotel, Lin got up and moved to the walk. He went to his horse and mounted and rode out beside them and McDougal favored him with an angry glance.

"This is outside of town, boy. Your law don't hold out there."

"I quit the job," Lin said and smiled at McDougal. "I figure there ought to be one man on your side under eighty."

McDougal reined in and stared at Lin. "You sure you ain't gone crazy?"

"No, but I'm riding along." Lin looked across at Charley Yancey. "You can drop out of this, Charley. I'll ride out with the old buzzard."

Yancey grinned then and relief showed in every seamed inch of his face. "All right with me, Lin. I wasn't quite ready to go yet anyhow." He reined his horse away.

"Let's get it over with," Lin said.

McDougal thought about it for a minute and then gave a brief nod. They turned their horses and went on down the street and out of town. Behind them, people moved out into the street to watch. The flats were a quarter of a mile on and lower than the street end and everyone could see. There were two horses standing out there now and the Morrisons stood fifty yards from the mounts.

Lin said, "When it starts, you take Wes."

McDougal just grunted.

Lin pulled his gun from the holster, opened the loading gate and moved the cylinder around and replaced the spent cartridge his hammer had been riding on. He settled the gun easily back in the leather.

THEY rode until they were a hundred yards from the Morrisons and got down. Moving away from the horses, they turned and marched straight at the brothers. Lin saw the expressions of surprise on their faces at the sight of him and felt satisfaction. Pete had planned this very carefully, knowing that he was taking no real chance. But it had gone sour and he didn't like it all.

They pulled up twenty paces from the Morrisons. McDougal's hard voice bit out. "Well, we're here. You can open the ball."

Wes Morrison shifted uneasily. He wasn't liking this either. Pete Morrison's face held a calculating look. He said, "I thought you was a lawman, Thompson."

"I quit the job, Pete. I figured you needed a little competition. I never did like seeing a wolf loose with sheep."

"Are you fightin', or ain't you," McDougal said harshly. "You were full of big talk this morning. What's it going to be."

Pete Morrison shrugged slightly. "It's your pot, old man. Come on, Wes." He wheeled abruptly about and walked to his horse and Wes went after him, hurrying.

"Be out of this country before mornin'," McDougal bellowed. "My crew will be around there at dawn. If you're there, they'll hang you."

Pete wheeled, his face ugly with rage, and Lin stiffened, sure it was coming now. "We'll be gone, old man. But you don't take the credit. If it wasn't for Thompson, you'd be kickin' in the dust right now."

Lin spoke then, very soft with his words. "Get going, Pete. You're pushing your luck." Pete put his bright gaze on Lin and the desire to draw was a stain across his face. But Pete had been playing it careful too long. Now when he had to take a chance, he didn't have the nerve. Lin saw his gaze fall away, saw him crumble. Then

he had turned and was walking quickly towards his horse, his shoulders point down.

Afterwards, Lin turned and walked to his horse. He mounted and rode back towards town, not waiting for McDougal. Everything had caught up with him then and he felt bitter and defeated. He remembered the unbelieving shock in Lettie's eyes when he had told her he would help McDougal. He thought about the years ahead without her and knew how bad it was going to be. McDougal caught up with him and rode beside him, silent.

At the edge of town, McDougal said simply, "Thanks, Lin."

"It's all right," Lin said and meant it. "You'd have done it for me."

They were abreast the hotel then and Bert Parran stood on the porch. Parran called across the dust. "Hold on, McDougal. I want to talk to you." Both riders pulled up. McDougal's puzzled glance touched Lin and Lin shrugged slightly. Both of them turned in at the hotel hitch rail and got down. They came up on the walk in front of Parran and they halted there. There was an air of coldness about Parran, usually a friendly man.

"What's on your mind, Bert?" Mc Dougal asked irritably. "I'm in a hurry to get a drink." McDougal hadn't yet caught the hardness in Parran's face, but Lin had. He had seen too many men look like this and trouble always followed. He stepped aside, until he had both men in front of him.

"Five years ago, you moved onto my west range," Parran said. "You chased my beef home and moved your stuff on. I let you get away with it. I made a mistake. Tomorrow morning, I'm movin' your beef off and takin' back that range."

McDougal's face registered a complete surprise. It took him several seconds to absorb the news and then the old, intolerant anger broke. "You haven't got the guts."

"You've known me thirty years," Parran replied coolly. "In that time, how often have I gone back on my word? I'll be there in the morning."

McDOUGAL studied Parran's face for a long time. Then he chuckled. "I believe you will at that. Well, I won't fight you. It was your range in the first place and if you'd run me off then, I wouldn't have fought. But you bluffed out. What changed your mind?"

"That's my business," Parran said briefly. "Go on down to the Fair Lady. I'll be along shortly and buy the drinks."

McDougal turned and stalked away, a hard old man, who could respect only toughness in others.

Lin waited until McDougal was out of earshot and said, "You been eating bear meat, Bert?"

"Not exactly. Come on upstairs a minute." Lin followed him into the hotel and upstairs, puzzled by the way he was acting. Parran knocked briefly at the door of his room and then opened it. Lettie and her mother were at the window, having witnessed this scene in the street. Mrs. Parran's face wore an expression of shocked incredulity. Lettie saw Lin then and her expression warmed and softened.

Bert Parran said, "I got back the land from McDougal, Lettie. Now you've got no reason to hate the man. I thought you might have something to say to Lin."

Her chin came up, proud and defiant and in that moment she looked like her mother. And right then he knew what Bert Parran had done for him. Bert had shown him the way. Mrs. Parran had used her crying and her pleas to keep Bert right in line all these years.

Today he had gotten it back. And he was getting Lettie and Lin back together, but the lesson here was plain to both of them. If Lettie wanted him, she was going to have to do the apologizing. Lin saw it and slowly he saw the realization come into Lettie's eyes.

"I was wrong," Lettie said. She rose and crossed to Lin and stood before him. "It was your decision. I shouldn't have meddled. Do you still want me, Lin?"

"I still want you. I'd always want you, Lettie. I love you."

She raised on her tiptoe and put her arms around him and kissed him fiercely.

Ira watched the two men hunting his sign

Sixgun Promise

By W. J. REYNOLDS

Nobody in his right mind would push Ira Irby around, but the gunslinger, Parvin, meant to have his try

IRA IRBY dropped off the train while it was still in motion. He passed the agent with his cart, nodding briefly, and hurried on toward town a hundred yards away. The agent looked after the big man with rising excitement.

"Hell's gonna pop now," he muttered, "and that's for sure."

Ira cut into the street around the Bright Star livery and his long legs carried him quickly up the street to the Arizona saloon. Men lounging on the saloon's porch were at instant attention, then parted as Ira stepped onto the porch and went up the outside stairs two at a time. He paused briefly before the door with the legend VALLEY CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION printed on it, then shoved the door open and stepped into the room.

Three men lounged at a table. They stiffened and sat up straight as Ira Irby stepped inside, their startled expressions

becoming quickly apprehensive. Irby raked the three with a chill stare. Sam Pockman, president of the association, a beefy man with graying hair. Horn, secretary, a slight bespectacled young man who was staring at Irby in open alarm. And Kline, a rancher who shouted loudest about the rustling here. Kline was the least apprehensive of the three, but it seemed to Irby that there might be both worry and a satisfied triumph in the rancher's face.

Irby directed his words to Pockman. "Sam, what the hell is this I hear about you hiring a damn bounty killer to get Bob?"

"Now hold on, Ira," Pockman said quickly. "We hired him to get evidence on the rustling hereabouts, and bring in the rustler. Not to kill anybody."

"Parvin," Ira said bluntly, "don't bring in anybody alive to dispute his evidence. He don't touch a case unless he's got full leeway to kill."

Pockman was defensive, but determined. "You'd feel that way, Ira, Bob's your brother. But Parvin found one of *my* hides buried behind your and Bob's barn. It was months old, Ira. We had a search warrant, but Bob wasn't there. We made a circle on the range, and caught Bob redhanded hazing two of Kline's yearling steers into the malpais. The doctored part of the brands were still fresh."

"Bob's no rustler," Ira said shortly.

Kline had a hard grin on his face. "He may be a dead one by now, Irby. Parvin took a shot at him. The kid turned his horse at the same moment or he'd sure be dead, but he was hit all right!"

Ira Irby seemed to freeze and his eyes flared, going nearly black. Kline and Pockman went stiff, hands flat on the table. Horn made a strangled sound but probably couldn't have moved if he'd tried.

When Ira Irby spoke it was in a deadly quiet voice that made the men quiver.

"Parvin had better be fired, quick. And if Bob is hurt bad or dies, I will personally kill the three of you. Right in the guts." He held them another half minute with his flaring eyes, then wheeled and stalked out.

"Oh, my God!" he heard Horn squawk behind him. "We should never have allowed Mr. Kline to insist on Parvin. Irby will kill us all."

"Shut up with that talk," Kline said.

So, Ira thought savagely, Kline was behind the whole thing. He'd thought so but needed concrete evidence. Kline had done well in the last few years. Better than his neighbors, but he still wasn't big enough to be throwing a thousand dollar reward around. That's what Kate had wired him, that Kline had tacked a thousand dollars onto the association's usual five hundred dollar reward for the conviction of a rustler.

Ira stormed down the stairs, passed through the loungers again and entered the saloon. The first man he saw was Parvin, the bounty killer, sitting at a back table.

Parvin was a big man, hollow chested and with a loose gut sagging over his belt. Baggy pants legs dragging over sorry boots. But his looks didn't deceive Ira Irby. Parvin was a manhunter of experience, hard and dangerous, and completely merciless.

Ira Irby thought he knew why Parvin had chosen Bob Irby for his victim. He hated Ira for one thing. Ira had, when he was marshal of a trail town, pistol whipped Parvin almost to death for shooting a man in the back. The man had been wanted and Parvin had come clear as usual, but he hated Ira Irby. The second reason would need proof, that the local rustler had pointed the finger at Bob for reasons of his own. He wanted Bob dead.

PARVIN was the man for that job. Occasionally, Parvin took these stock detective jobs when bounty hunting was slack, or they offered quick, easy money. He never failed to get his man. Dead—with evidence. Guilt had nothing to do with it. Usually it was someone with no money or influence, and Parvin rode on with blood money in his pocket, the rustling usually slacking off long enough to maintain his reputation.

Only this time, Parvin was in for trouble. He'd expected, Ira was sure, to have Bob dead, the rustling apparently cleared, and be long gone before Ira Irby found out about it. Parvin had slipped there. Kate Yancey had sent Ira a telegram the moment she saw how the wind blew.

Parvin's broad, fat face was expressionless as he met Ira's stare, but the muddy eyes stirred with some emotion very like amusement. He had his hands under the table, on a pistol butt, Ira guessed. Parvin was not a coward, that Ira knew, but the man was murderously cautious. He'd never stand up and fight unless he had to, or shoot a man any way but in the back if he could help it.

Ira turned to the bartender and said, "Howdy, Curly."

"Glad to see you, Ira," Curly said, and set a bottle and two glasses on the bar. "On me."

They tossed off the drinks, and Ira said, keeping his voice low, "What's the deal here, Curly?"

Curly shook his head. "Bad, Ira. You know this little rustling business. One or two or three steers or heifers, now and then for the last four-five years. It mounts up. Ranchers screamed until Pockman had to act. Kline stomped and shouted for Parvin and a few others were mad enough to back him. Pockman had to give in. He didn't want Parvin, he wanted you. Parvin pinned it on Bob. Bob's lucky, he was nearly killed. But he was on guard. Kate tipped him off."

Kate again, Ira thought, and there was a warm feeling inside him for her. "This was planned carefully, Curly," he said. "Sam Pockman said the hide had been buried a long time. The real rustler had the thing set up. That means that tubgut Parvin is working with him."

"It looks that way to me, and a few others," Curly said. "Bob's no thief."

Ira's lips pressed tightly and his eyes flared again, briefly. "It don't look too good for a certain rancher from where I stand!"

Curly grinned and mopped his bald head. "I come here thirty years ago with your Pa, Ira. You get more like him every day. He'd have had a walleyed fit over this." His seamed face became quickly serious. "Parvin's got protection, Ira, don't forget that. He's got authority from the association, he's a deputy sheriff as is customary in these cases."

"Neither of those commissions will turn a .44 bullet," Ira said.

"Thought I'd mention it," Curly said. "You got any more ideas, besides a .44 bullet?"

"One or two," Ira said. He grinned a little at Curly. "I'll try them first."

"Maybe you'd better talk to Kate," Curly said, grinning. "She may have some ideas too. But her thoughts have been running to mayhem lately. She came after Parvin with a shotgun after he pistol whipped Pate Yancey."

Ira stiffened. "Pistol whipped Pate. Why?"

"Because Kate tipped Bob. Parvin claimed that Pate told his daughter about the order from the Judge to search your place. Maybe Pate did, being our regular deputy sheriff and the town marshal!"

"Pate's a good man. I'll remember about that whipping."

A chair scraped and Parvin slouched up to the bar, hand near his gun. "I got a job to do, Irby. I want no trouble from you." It was a blunt statement. Parvin's muddy eyes regarded Ira steadily and hard.

"You got more to worry about than a thousand dollar reward, Parvin, and what was passed under the table. When you went for Bob, you went for me."

"Is that the way you want it, Ira?"

"That's the way it is. You make another try for that kid, and I'll kill you like a dog. Like you do it, Parvin. Without warning."

Parvin said nothing, just nodded. He didn't yell and rant about being a deputy sheriff or stock detective, his permissions to kill, it would not have helped him with Ira Irby and he knew it. Ira wheeled and walked out.

His boots made solid, angry thumps on the walk as he tramped the short distance up the street to Yancey's office and turned

into the doorway. The old ex-cowboy came to his feet with all the alacrity his gimpy leg allowed.

"Ira! Am I proud to see you." Ira gripped his hand with the firmness of old friends. "Doggone, Ira," Yancey went on. "How's the gold guarding business?"

"Good, Pate. About got enough to keep me and the kid on an even keel for awhile. I hear you haven't been doing so good."

PATE YANCEY started getting red in the face and he cursed Parvin for a bounty-killer and several other things, none of them good. "I tell you, Ira, it was a sad day for the valley when Pockman hired that damned murderer. I'd shoot him myself if I thought I could."

"I hear he's really Kline's boy."

Yancey cursed Kline. "That's right, Ira, it makes a man wonder some. I ain't wondering anymore. I told him the next time he set foot in my house I'd shoot him! He ain't been back lately."

"How is Kate, Pate?"

Yancey lost some of his redfaced anger, and slanted a sharp glance at Ira. "Kate's fit as a fiddle, Ira. She'll sure want you to supper."

"It's a deal," Ira said. "You got a horse I can use, Pate?"

"Dang right! Just take either of the three in the lot behind the house." He eyed Ira sharply. "Are you going to bring the kid in, Ira? Kate can tell you where he's at. She won't tell me. Says I'm the law and ain't got no business knowing!" He chuckled.

"I want to talk to Bob first. And work on some ideas I've got. This thing has got to be broken up now, Pate, and quick. Before the killing starts."

"I agree, Ira, you yell when you're ready. I'm still the regular deputy here and I think Sheriff Goner over at the county seat will back me in anything reasonable. No need to say which side I'm on. Bob ain't no more a rustler than Parvin is a preacher!"

"Thanks, Pate, I'll see you. I'll go say hello to Kate and get that horse."

Ira left the business section of town and entered the residential area. He turned in at a small clapboard house, painted white and with a white picket fence around it. He paused with his hand on the gate.

He was eager to see Kate and yet he dreaded the loneliness that would haunt him later. Kate Yancey was the main reason why Ira Irby was not on the little ranch now. He could use the good money he was making as gunguard for the mining company to buy a herd of shorthorns, but the ranch was secure enough now to keep him and Bob comfortably. He would soon have enough money to buy those shorthorns.

Yet he knew that even then he would not come back—with Bob and Kate. Ira Irby had been in love with Kate Yancey for years, but Bob and Kate were the same age, five years younger than Ira. It surprised Ira to think that despite Bob being always thought of as his kid brother, that the boy was twenty-one next month.

Bob and Kate made a handsome pair. They'd grown up together, went everywhere together with much devilment and laughter, especially laughter. Kate had been considered by the valley as Bob Irby's girl. They had a lot of fun. Yet strangely enough, around Ira, Kate was reserved, friendly enough but not any devilment or teasing. Both Bob and Kate called him Big Man. It was the nearest Kate ever came to teasing him, and even that term was used differently than by Bob. It was hero worship with Bob, but with Kate he didn't know what it was.

He passed through the gate and up the walk to knock gently on the door. Steps hurried to the door, and then Kate was there in front of him. The top of her black, shiny head came just even with his shoulder point. Her eyes were a clear gray, and the shotgun of freckles across her nose put a weakness in Ira's stomach.

"How's my sweetheart?" he asked, smiling.

He was unprepared for her reaction. "Ira!" she cried, then flung her arms around his neck. His arms closed around her without volition, and she was pressed against him as she kissed him on the

mouth. For a shattering time her lips were warm and full of all the sweetness he had dreamed of, and Kate Yancey was a warm, soft pressure in his arms.

She broke away then, her face crimson. "Ira, I—Come in, Ira."

His voice was shaky. "Kate, I think I'll turn right around and come in again. If I get a welcome like that one."

"I'm just wrought up, Ira, and I'm so glad to see you, so glad you're here."

"Looks like a bad situation, Kate," he said. "Pate said I could take a horse."

"First you'll stay for supper. I'll be ready in another hour."

HE FOUND out from Kate that Bob was hiding in what they called the Coyote Den, a round knoll that lifted out of Litchfield's Prairie, and with nearly an acre of jumbled rock, brush and rattlesnakes on top. It was surrounded with country on all sides that would make a better hideout, and no one but a fool kid, or a very smart one, would hide there, less than five miles from town. Even Parvin hadn't thought to look there. Kate slipped him food and water, and she had outwitted Parvin so far.

"Bob nearly scared the wits out of me two nights ago. He came in on foot to see if you'd showed up yet. Parvin snoops around here every morning, looking for tracks."

His eyes were gentle. "Bob will come through all right, Kate. I'll see that he does."

She gave him a strange look. "I hope so, Ira."

"That's a neat little ranch out there. How are you and Bob getting on, Kate?"

"Bob and me? Oh, fine, Ira. About the same as always." Again she gave him that strange, steady little look.

Is something wrong between them, he wondered? But Kate wasn't one to hold trouble against a man. She'd had a spat with Bob. He was relieved. A lover's quarrel that was being held over until Bob was out of trouble. They'd patch it up, they always did.

An hour after dark, Ira Irby was riding out of town. He paid no attention to his back trail, other than to see that no one closed in on him. He expected to be followed, maybe by Parvin himself, but he doubted it. Parvin would be fooling with someone in his class or better, and he wouldn't chance it, even though he would like to bushwhack Ira Irby—safely. He thought he knew who it would be, but he'd made sure and then see Bob.

A brisk hour's ride brought him to his and Bob's I Bar ranch, but Ira didn't ride in, merely stopped his borrowed horse a short distance away from the neat buildings and sat looking. He could see little with the light from a first quarter moon, but enough to know that Bob had lost a lot of sweat on the place. Bob was a hard working kid and Ira didn't doubt but what the entire two thousand acres reflected the same industry as the buildings.

Ira was sure now that he was being followed, and he rode on toward the jumble of hills to the north. An hour after he left the ranch, he was among the hills, a land of broken hills and valleys with plenty of cover for the experienced.

Ira laid a pattern of travel that indicated a destination in the deeper hills, then set about losing his pursuers. He led them for five more miles, but finally he stood in the sheltering timber high on a slope and watched the two men pass below him, hunting his sign. From their actions, he guessed they were some irritated. When they had passed, Ira mounted and rode back toward town.

His two trailers were Kline's two cowboys. Blake and Kuhn.

Ira recalled all he knew of Blake and Kuhn. It wasn't much. Blake, a lean, rawhide man with little to say, and Kuhn was a blond German that Ira remembered as always blistered and peeling, and with an intolerance in him that kept his blue eyes continuously hot. Kuhn had been in no trouble that Ira knew of, but Blake had served a term in Texas for cowthieving. He didn't think that his prison record was known here.

A greedy man trips himself, Ira thought, and Kline was no different. He was smart,

but he was trying to clean the slate all at once. Now that he had his ranch going, well stocked and money ahead, he was very likely ready to stop his rustling. He wanted the case closed by showing Bob Irby as the thief. Kline wanted Kate Yancey too, and Bob Irby had to be cleared out of the way for that. He had, with Parvin, intended to do it quickly, before Bob knew what they were up to and before Ira could be reached. They had come alarmingly close to doing it. But for Pate Yancey's talking to Kate and her quick action in warning Bob and sending Ira a telegram, Bob would be dead, and the case closed.

Shortly past midnight, Ira Irby sat on a flat rock at the Coyote Den, talking to his brother Bob. At Bob's age Ira had already made something of a reputation as a deputy town marshal, and the rep grew when he became the he-coon in other towns. But Bob had never been out of the county. He kicked up his heels and ripped about the country on Saturdays and Sundays, but he had no experience with which to fight a deadly trap like this apparently was. Bob was a hard worker, not a hardcase.

IRA had pretended not to notice Bob's shaky greeting, just gripped the boy's hand with deep feelings of his own. His first question was about the wound, and Bob assured him it was just a long blister across his back, but it had scared him nearly to death, Bob claimed.

He lost his grin then and looked at Ira straight. "Ira, I swear to God I never had anything to do with this rustling! I can't even figure that hide unless it was a time nearly six months ago when I nearly caught somebody snooping at the barn one night, late. I knew Parvin was coming, and when Kate come larruping out there and said they were coming for me, man, I lit out!"

"You did right, Bob. Parvin would have killed you. What about that snooping?"

"Didn't see him, just heard him. Me and Buster tracked a horse next morning, but soon lost it. Never seen or heard anything again. Buster is holding down the ranch."

"About those steers Pockman claimed you were hazing, Bob."

"They caught me, all right. When I lit out, I headed for the malpais. I ran onto them steers in a little pocket out there on our range. With brush blocking the only out. It looked like a set up to me, and I hazed them out of there. It was plain as day they were Kline's steers blotched over into our brand. I started them deeper into the malpais but the next thing I knowed there was Parvin and Pockman and Kline and Kline's cowboys, Blake and Kuhn. I spurred my horse as Parvin threw up his rifle and fired. He skinned my back but I was leaving there and he didn't get another clear shot." Bob made a violent motion with his hand. "Ira, what can I do? Damn it, it looks like I was caught red-handed."

"We'll see. It's plain the stage was set even before Parvin got here. He was just brought in to find the evidence already planted, and to kill you and close the case. The real rustler would have had no more worries. What about the hide, how could they tie that? This rustler isn't eating the cows."

"I think I got that figured, Ira. A steer was found, or it's skinned carcass, between our range and Kline's. It's front leg was broken. That was six-seven months ago. The thief skinned it. They'll tie that in there."

"Sounds reasonable." He was thoughtful for a moment, trying to find an angle. This had to be broken quickly. It wasn't reasonable that Bob could stay here much longer without someone getting wise. The kid would have to skin out if it wasn't cleared up in another day or two. He looked at Bob. "This man of Kline's, Blake, is he married?"

"Yes. Married to Kuhn's sister. They live in the old Moten place about a mile this side of Kline. Why?"

"Just an idea I'm working on, kid. You're in a mess. We can't prove you were framed, and the thief isn't going to come forward and say so. We *have* to prove it, and the only way is to show up

the real thief so there is no doubt about who is guilty. He's not going to sit still for that. You sit tight, kid. With me snooping around, they won't have time to watch Kate so close, she'll bring you grub or any message from me. Say, kid, you and Kate haven't had a fight, have you? She acted sort of funny when I asked about you and her."

Bob chuckled. "I'll just bet she did! Sometimes, Big Man, you don't act as smart as Kate and me always thought you were."

"Now what does that mean?"

Bob was grinning again. "You get me out of this mess, Big Man, and maybe I'll tell you." He slapped Ira's shoulder. "In the meantime, junior, just be careful."

Ira grinned back and tousled his brother's hair much as he used to do. "All right, brat. I'll see you, and sleep with one eye open and your rifle cocked."

"I will."

IT WAS an hour before daylight when Ira left his horse in the brush near the old Moten place and stalked the house on foot. He hunkered in a weedy ditch and saw the lamp lighted inside, then Kuhn and Blake came outside. They went to the barn and fed their horses while the woman moved about inside cooking breakfast. Finally, the men came back, washed up and went back into the house. Ira moved a little until he could see them sitting down to the table. He got up and walked quietly to the door, then kicked it open and walked inside.

He said, hard and quick, "Don't move, any of you."

The woman had dropped her coffee cup, the liquid trailing across the oil cloth to spill on the floor. Kuhn was half up and Blake was in a like position. Ira saw their quick glances at the belted pistols against the wall.

"Better sit down," Ira warned ominously. "Don't think for a second that I won't blow your guts all over this room."

"What do you want with us?" Blake asked. Both he and Kuhn sank back into their chairs. "We ain't done nothing. We just work for Kline."

"I know. I figure you two boys will let me in on some of Kline's little secrets—like this thieving he's been doing."

"I don't know no secrets," Blake growled, his beard stubbled face was pale, his eyes uneasy, possibly scared.

"Kline's built up his herd," Ira went on. "He is bound to have doctored brands on his ranch. But they're old and were made, probably, when the steers and heifers were calves. Only one way to tell, kill one and skin the brand off and check the under side. I figure you boys will tell me which ones to look at."

"To hell with you!" Blake said. "You're crazy."

Ira looked at the woman. She was blond like her brother, Kuhn, and had a harried, frightened expression. Kuhn's blistered and peeling face was less red than normal.

"You're wanted in Texas, Blake," Ira said and saw the man's start, the plain fright that covered the woman's face. "I'll send you back there to jail. A killing on the San Saba, wasn't it, Blake? You'll hang."

"It was self defense."

"Maybe. Maybe you didn't have the kind of friends the dead man had. Any way you'd hang, self defense or not. I'll make you a deal. You tell me what I want to know, and I'll not speak a word about you. You can pack up and clear out. Otherwise you go back to Texas—in irons. Make up your mind." There was no hint of uncertainty in him, just his hard stare.

They sat frozen, glaring at him in fear. The woman was the first to break. She stared beseechingly at her husband.

"Tell him, Carl, please tell him. I'll start packing."

Blake and Kuhn exchanged glances, and Ira knew that he had them.

"Better tell him, Carl," Kuhn said. "He's a damn wolf and will find out anyhow."

Blake gave up.

"All right, Irby," he said resignedly. "I guess that damned killing will follow me to the grave. Kline is the rustler. We didn't steal any cattle, me and Frank here.

But we did know about it, we even helped Kline doctor some of the brands. He knew about that killing, too."

"Can you tell me specific cows?"

"Yes. There's several, in fact most of the cows on Vaquero Creek are stolen. Yours, Pockman's, Renfro's, and a half dozen others. He never took over two-three at a time, and never over four or five from any one man in a year's time. Nearly any of that bunch will show the right brand under the hide. He was ready to quit and get married now that his ranch is paying off. He had to have a fall guy though, and Bob was it. He wanted him out of the way on account of the Yancey girl, I think."

"All right," Ira said. "Thanks. There won't be a word from me about you, Blake, but it might save your neck to clear out. When this comes out, the ranchers might use a little rope in the right places and some not so right as those things go."

"We're clearing out now," Blake said.

They were already throwing packs and food on their saddled horses when Ira mounted his horse and turned toward town.

When Ira Irby dismounted in front of Yancey's office, he saw Kline mounting the stairs to the association office. It was barely eight o'clock. Worrying, Ira thought, and the scheming rancher would have even more to worry about before the day was over.

YANCEY was firing up a cigar as Ira entered. "What's up, Ira? You look sort of grim."

"Pate, can you get up a posse this morning? Say yourself, Pockman and two or three more ranchers or trustworthy businessmen?"

"I could if I had a reason."

"Tell them I told you where the kid was. On Vaquero Creek. He figured that was the best hiding place—near Kline's. You want some good men to see him safe in jail. Kline is in town, he'll want to go, of course, as it's his land, and maybe for another reason. Take him, and also Parvin if he's around."

"He rode in with Kline. He stays out there at night sometimes." Pate Yancey scowled at Ira. "That's a blame hot ride when Bob ain't nowhere near there, Ira Irby."

"I know he ain't, Pate. But I want all of you out there. You'll know where to go. You'll hear a few shots just before you get there, and you'll see some dead cattle. When you get close you'll see a flap of skin peeled back exposing the original brand. You'd better be alert about then, Mister Deputy."

Pate Yancey came to his feet, his eyes gleaming. "Damn it, Ira, come out with it, we'll have to have a search warrant, an order from the Judge."

"Pate, you're going after Bob, remember?"

"Damn it, Ira, you and Bob are like my own sons. What if those brands are all right? You'll be in a hell of a fix."

"If they're all right, you won't see me, Pate," Ira said, grinning.

Yancey relaxed. "Damn it, I'll be there. But you better not be if there's nothing out of line with them brands."

Ira went to Yancey's house, saddled a fresh horse, winked at Kate and rode out again. Once clear of town he cut toward Vaquero Creek, and behind and to one side he saw a feather of dust. Yancey was on his way.

Ira arrived at the creek two miles ahead of Yancey's posse. He hated to do what he now had to do, but there was no other way. He drifted his horse toward a clump of cottonwoods where a dozen cows lay in the shade, chewing their cuds. Ira mentally selected six. Might as well go whole hog now. He lifted his rifle from the saddle boot.

He shot six before the others went crashing away down the creek. Ira dismounted, got out his knife and skinned back a flap of hide that held the K Bar K of Kline.

He stood looking at them a full minute, elation replacing his worry. Two of the cows were Kline's, plainly showing his brand on the under side. But four of them weren't Kline's. One belonged to Ira and

Bob, the other three had the original brand of Pockman, Renfro and, Ira grinned, the other brand belonged to Judge Frailey.

Ira mounted his horse, pulled his pistol and revolved the cylinder, then set it back in his holster. He reloaded the rifle. When he heard the pound of the now hurrying posse, he pulled his mount into the brush along the creek and waited.

They came in a group along the timber then were hauling their horses up with startled shouts at sight of the dead cattle.

"Look what that damn thieving Irby has done!" Kline yelled. "He's killed—" His voice suddenly faded out, and they were all staring at the peeled back flaps of hide.

Then Pockman, Yancey, Judge Frailey, Renfro and a townsman named Corey, were piling off their horses, bending over to look at the brands, then the outside. Ira, the rifle cocked, eased his horse out of the brush.

He saw the shock and fright in Kline's face, and the quick look he exchanged with the slouching Parvin. In that look was the end of Kline's hope to be a big frog in the local puddle, the end of his hopes and the sudden desperate fear, the sure knowledge of what they would find and what quick action these ranchers would take.

Kline was already tightening his reins for a dash for safety when Pockman reared up from a dead cow, his face red with rage. "One of my cows," he roared. "Kline, you dirty dog."

"Hold it, Kline," Ira shouted, as both Kline and Parvin hauled their horses violently around.

PARVIN was the more deadly of the two. He drew and fired in a lightning ing fast motion and with amazing accuracy considering his whirling horse. Ira shot him dead center with the rifle, and was levering another shell into the chamber, turning it on Kline even while Parvin was sprawling in a loose limbed fall from his mount.

Kline got off a shot that missed Ira by three feet and was pulling the trigger for another shot when Ira Irby shot him through the shirt pocket.

"There's your rustler, Pockman," Ira said. "And his damn bounty killer."

Pockman swallowed but his eyes met Ira's steadily. "I'm sorry, Ira. I ain't got much of an excuse, I guess, even if the ranchers were giving me hell."

The tension ran out of Ira, these people were his friends, and he knew how a thing could build and build until a man became desperate and took desperate measures.

"All right, Sam. If you fellows will take care of this, I'll go get Rob. He's some worried that you might guess, where he is, and besides, he wants a bath."

By the time they were entering town, Bob Irby had picked the last detail of the fight out of Ira, but finally sensing Ira's preoccupation, he asked, "When are you coming home to stay, Ira? Sort of lonesome out there."

"Don't be a fool, kid. It wouldn't be lonesome with Kate. When are you two going to settle down and get married?"

Bob grinned at him as though he were sure of something. "I said I'd tell you something, Ira. Somebody is going to have to tell you."

"Sure, kid." Ira kept his face straight. Bob was going to tell him now that he and Kate were getting married. Well, he thought, it was cool up in Colorado and the ranch would make Bob and Kate a good living.

"Kate and me," Bob said, "have lots of fun, always have. I think a mighty lot of Kate, and she likes me. Any fool between six and sixty would want to marry her, even me. I asked her too, but it didn't kill me when she turned me down."

"Turned you down? But, Bob—"

"Hold on, junior. I know what you thought, so does nearly everybody around here. Kate *is* in love, Big Man. Oh, she's got it real bad and has had it for a long time." He held up his hand again as Ira's mouth opened. "She's in love with a damn fool who's always chasing off to make money, and is too busy throwing her at

(Concluded on page 113)

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Dave Morgan was his name, and somewhere on his backtrail violence had sickened him, but make no mistake—this was a fighting man

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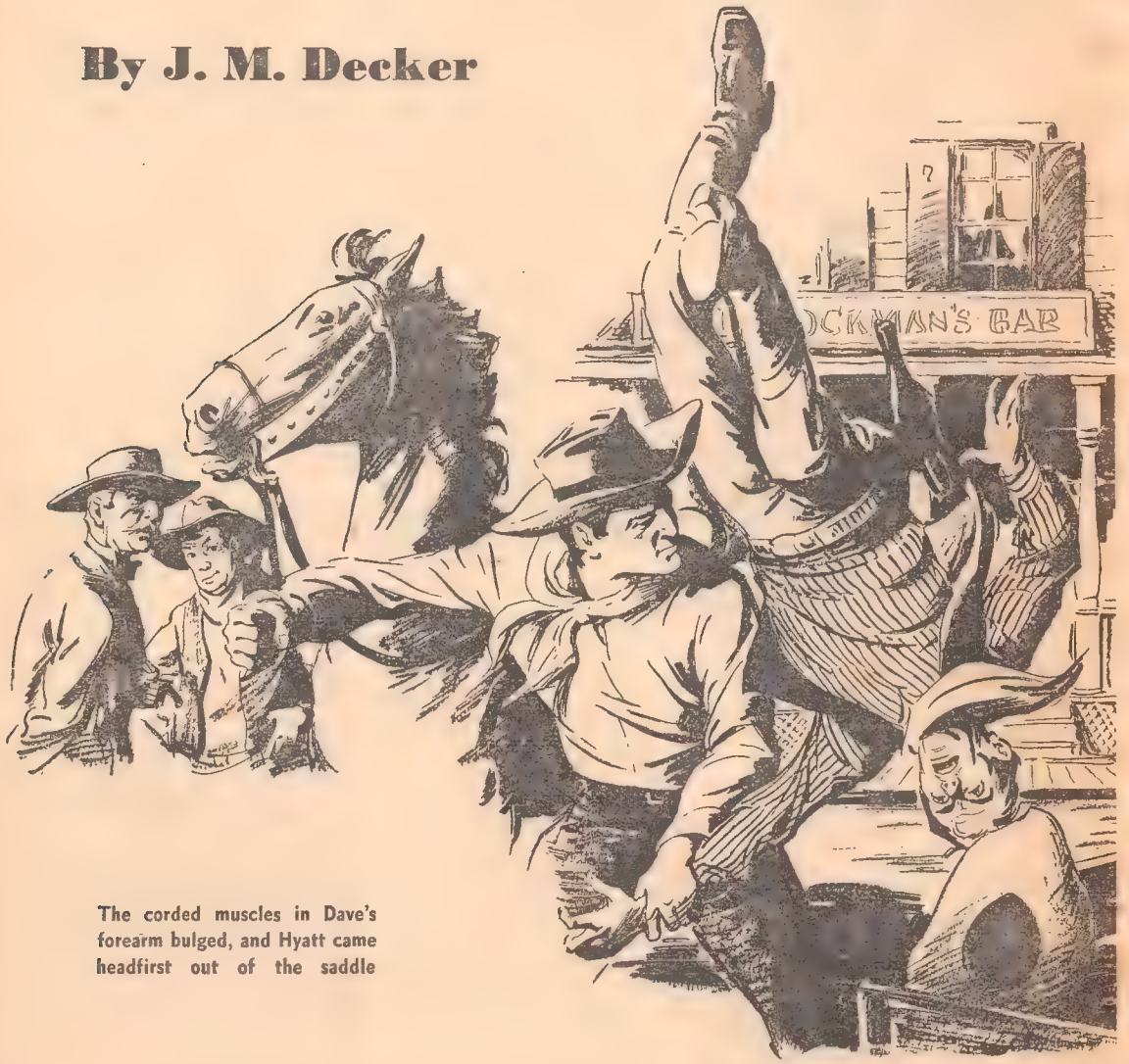

The corded muscles in Dave's forearm bulged, and Hyatt came headfirst out of the saddle

I

DAVE MORGAN reined in his horse and let his long frame relax in the saddle. His gray eyes drifted briefly over the young man lounging in the bunkhouse doorway, then returned to the man in front of him.

"I reckon you're Frank Lee," he said. "I was told in town you could likely use a man."

The man he addressed nodded briefly. He was a slight, gray-haired man with a lean body toughened by many years in the saddle. The same years had left him with a twisted leg from a bad fall under a bronc, but they had failed to subdue his spirit, and the eyes that he turned on the tall stranger before him still had a bright flame burning in their blue depths.

"I'm Frank Lee, and I could use a hand," the older man admitted. "Were you told why?"

Dave Morgan said indifferently, "I didn't ask. Heard you needed a man, and I needed the job. That seemed like enough."

"It's enough for me if it is for you, but I reckon it's only fair to tell you what you're walking into. I need hands, because I've got trouble with a neighbor. I had three men, and two of the yellow-bellied sons quit when the thing started. This ain't a big spread, but it's too big to run with one hand."

Dave said laconically, "Must be a rough neighbor."

"He is rough," said Frank Lee. "He's rough as they come. And he's got some damn rough hands on his payroll."

Dave sighed and shifted in the saddle. He said, "I could still use that job."

The older man straightened slightly and regarded Dave with quickened interest. "Maybe you're a reasonable hand with a gun yourself?"

Dave dropped his eyes briefly to his hands and then raised them steadily to the other man. His dark, rough-planed face was utterly still, and his eyes were a flat, leaden gray.

He said, "No, I don't carry a gun," and left it there.

Frank Lee said, "Well—" and the hope had gone out of his voice. He was silent a moment. "You've got the job, and I hope you won't regret it." He nodded toward the young man in the bunkhouse doorway and added, "Eby'll show you where to put your roll. What name goes down on the payroll?"

"Dave Morgan," he replied, and stepped down from the saddle. Dave led his horse to the tie-rack and dropped the reins over the pole and untied the canvas roll from behind the cantle. He swung the roll to his shoulder and walked toward the bunkhouse.

The man in the doorway stepped aside to let Dave through. He was a young man, hardly more than a boy, with a small frame, and blond hair framing a face that was almost feminine in its fine-boned construction.

"I'm Eby Harris. Heard you talking with the old man. Glad to hear you're staying," said the young man.

Dave nodded and tossed his roll onto an empty bunk. "Sounds like it could be an interesting stay. What's all the trouble about?" he asked.

EBY HARRIS leaned against the door frame and reached into his pocket for the makings. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Neighbor we got," Eby replied, "Wade Hyatt, runs the Rafter H. He's swallowed up damn near every other outfit in the territory, and now he's after this one." He twisted the cigarette expertly, touched a match to it, and added, "Seems he's in a fair way to get it."

"I reckon there's a way to do most anything, if a man goes about it right," Dave said.

"He's going about it right. He's got a couple of hard-case characters that pick a fight with every hand old Frank hires. It's got so there ain't a man in the country who will work here. I reckon friend Hyatt figures old Frank can't operate without hands, and if he can't operate he'll have to sell."

Dave said, "Sort of a long-winded way to go about it. Why don't he hunt his trouble direct with Lee?"

Eby grinned. He said succinctly, "Nancy." He caught Dave's sharp glance and continued, "Frank's daughter. Wade's lost his head over her and she won't give him the time of day. I reckon killing her old man wouldn't tend to sweeten her any."

"And he figures only ruining him might?" Dave said with mild sarcasm.

Eby replied more seriously, "That's partly because he can't stop. It's just naturally Wade's nature to hog everything in sight. Maybe he figures with old Frank backed against the wall, Nancy'll see reason. He wasn't progressing nowhere but backward the way things stood."

Dave grunted and bent over the rope that bound his saddle roll. Eby watched him a moment in silence, and then straightened and flipped his cigarette out of the door.

"I'll put up your pony while you're getting located. Feed-bag's about due to go on," Eby said, then turned and followed the cigarette out into the yard.

Dave was putting the last of his personal things on the shelf above the bunk when the dinner bell sounded from the house. He flipped the ends of the canvas roll together and stepped through the door in time to see Eby crossing the yard from the corrals. He followed the younger

man around the ranch house to the back door, where wash-basins and towels were laid out on a wooden bench.

Dave filled one of the basins and bent over it, using his cupped hands to scoop the cold, clear water over his head. The water was inexpressibly soothing to the trail-dry dustiness of his skin, and he lowered his face into the basin and ladled it across the back of his neck, enjoying the sense of luxury that the lavish use of water always brings to a man who has made too many dry camps.

Finally satisfied, he straightened up, shook his head to rid it of excess water, and blotted up the remainder with a towel. He used his fingers in lieu of a comb to bring some order to his wet black hair, then turned to Eby, expecting to find the other man waiting.

Eby was not waiting. He had a small mirror propped against the water bucket, and he was crouched forward awkwardly, wielding a large pink comb, and striving earnestly to get a straight part in his rebellious blond hair. He became aware of Dave's eyes upon him and his freshy scrubbed skin turned a shade pinker.

"All right, damn it! You'll sing a different tune presently," Eby said angrily.

DAVE kept his face carefully expressionless and said with apparent sincerity, "My, she must be pretty."

"All right, enjoy yourself. By supper tomorrow you'll be begging to borrow this outfit, and then we'll see who enjoys himself."

Dave shook his head. He said gravely, "No, friend, I reckon it'd be no use. Against a natural born beauty like you I wouldn't stand a chance. Anyway, boy, all that work's a waste of time, all you've got to do is slow down and let them catch up with you. The little things lay awake nights figuring out how to get their loop on a man. I reckon it's the nature of the critter."

Eby did not reply. He put the comb and mirror away carefully in the angle of a brace under the bench. On his face was an odd expression of controlled emotion.

A warning sounded faintly in the back of Dave's mind, but he was feeling cheerful after his brisk wash and he ignored it.

"Take it from an old hand, friend," Dave said. "You'll have your foot in the rope before you know it if you don't—"

A wicked grin was spreading over Eby's face and Dave grew uneasy. He became aware of the uncomfortable sensation that someone was standing behind him and he glanced over his shoulder and his voice ran out in a weak gurgle.

The girl was standing in the open doorway, one shoulder resting comfortably against the frame as though she had been there for some time. Her lips, soft and generously formed, were parted in a slight smile that was belied by the expression in her eyes.

In a deceptively sweet voice she said, "You must be the Mr. Morgan that's going to help here."

"I—uh—yes, ma'am," Dave replied, very quietly.

She said, "Yes, I was sure of it." She hesitated a moment and added sweetly, "But don't let me interrupt your interesting talk, Mr. Morgan. Do go on. I've always loved to listen to the experiences of an 'old hand' like you."

Dave said uncomfortably, "I—that was all I was going to say, ma'am."

"All?" she asked, her eyes widening innocently. "But Mr. Morgan, you seemed so well informed on the subject. I thought —well, I suppose if you *won't* go on we might as well go in to supper." She paused in the act of turning in the doorway. She said, "You're going to enjoy your supper, Mr. Morgan. I'm *sure* you're going to enjoy it!"

As Dave followed her through the door he heard a muffled snort behind him. He turned and eyed Eby suspiciously, and said, "All right, don't let it really strangle you."

Eby's youthful face was a model of bland innocence.

"Why Mr. Morgan! I can hardly wait to learn more about how you old hands handle the ladies!"

II

MORNING found Dave Morgan and Eby Harris riding east from the ranch toward the distant range of mountains that rose like a dark cloud on the edge of the horizon. Dave was feeling good. Under his belt was a solid breakfast and the horse he sat was young and salty with a spring in his gait and a rattle in the cricket of his bit. The winged tips of the buffalo grass still glittered with moisture from last night's dew. Dave felt like whistling. He puckered up his lips and began an uncommonly cheerful rendition of *The Dying Cowboy.*

Eby checked the sudden start of his horse and glanced at Dave out of the edge of his eyes. He waited till the last cheerful note died out. He said shortly, "What brought that on?"

"I feel good," Dave answered.

Eby said sourly, "Well, that's just dandy! You blamed near got me piled." He rode on a moment in silence, then added, "What in hell you got to feel so good about?"

Dave grinned at him and said, "I feel good because I ain't a bone-headed young cowpoke without brains enough to see anything to feel good about on a morning like this one."

Eby turned his face back to the front. "Ah—I reckon you better see the doc, there's something come loose somewhere," he said disgustedly. But presently he too began to grin.

Dave rode with his eyes on the distant mountains. The sun had not yet cleared their ragged outline and the western slope was still in deep shadow. It reminded him of something. He thought about it, and it came to him that the soft, powder-blue shadow was just the color of Nancy Lee's eyes. And that cloud now, with its underside reflecting the rising sun in a strip of pale gold. If it had more shine to it, it would be almost the color of her hair. Not that any cloud of course could ever—

He was brought out of his pleasant reverie by the sound of Eby's voice.

"Come alive, friend. Company!"

Dave followed the direction of Eby's glance and saw two riders top a rise and come purposefully down the slope. He looked back at Eby and said, "Know them?"

Eby nodded. "I know them. The big one on the roan is Pete Morrel. The other one's Darby Burnett. They're a couple of pets Wade Hyatt keeps around to make sure old Frank stays short-handed." He glanced briefly at Dave and added dryly, "I reckon you're about due to find another job."

Dave didn't answer. He sat quietly, relaxed in the saddle, watching the approaching riders.

The man on the roan horse, Pete Morrel, was huge. He was not more than average in height, but his great body had the appearance of having been chiseled from a square block of solid granite. The massive legs, roped with muscle, bulged beyond the saddle swells and seemed to dwarf the horse he rode. Across his shoulders ran a great slab of muscle that served to shorten his neck until his head appeared to set directly on his shoulders.

Compared with his imposing companion, the second man made a poor impression. He was a small, frail man, and beside his huge companion he appeared insignificant and uninteresting.

THE two men did not speak until they drew rein six feet from Dave and Eby. It was a deliberate breach of range etiquette, obviously intended to set the mood for what was to come. They compounded the insult by sitting their horses a full minute, coolly examining Dave, before either of them spoke. Then the massive Pete looked down at his small companion.

He said laconically, "Sure beats hell what you find crawling around on the range nowadays, don't it, Darby?"

Darby Burnett didn't bother answering. He turned his sharp, pointed face to Eby and said, "What's the matter with it, Harris? Won't its mother let it carry a gun?"

"No law saws a man has to carry one," Eby said shortly.

The little man grinned. He looked like a sly, malignant fox. "But you carry a gun, don't you, Harris? Pack it around just like a growed-up man." He paused and his whole manner was a hopeful invitation. He said softly, "Ever figure to use it, boy?"

Eby's face changed from an angry pink to almost white, the skin stretched pale and tight in humiliated rage and frustration.

"Might." Eby's single word was without force, coming shallowly from the roof of his mouth.

Watching Darby Burnett, Dave thought, he's the one to watch! It's his meat and drink. From the corner of his eye he was aware of Eby stiffening in the saddle, and he knew the youngster was nerving himself for the try.

"Knew a top hand gunman once," Dave said casually, "only he was a sporting man. Made a habit of picking his competition from something in his own class."

Instantly Darby Burnett swung from the younger man to what promised to be a more interesting victim. His sallow face turned a dull red at the insult, and his pale eyes held a malignant glitter that was almost subhuman. He controlled his voice with obvious difficulty.

"Maybe you think you'd make a better class of competition? Maybe you'd like to try it on for fit?" Darby asked.

Dave let his eyes go innocently wide, and said, "Who, me? No thanks, I ain't that curious."

SOME of the tense eagerness went out of the small man's body and disgust crept into his eyes.

"No, I don't reckon you are. You look like a man that does his talking with his mouth." Darby turned carelessly to his big companion and continued. "We don't like characters that run off at the head, do we? Gives the country a bad name. You reckon this one better head for some other country?"

"Sounds like a good idea, Darby." Pete's wide face broke into a grin. He was enjoying himself.

Darby Burnett turned back to Dave and said almost pleasantly, "We've decided you'd best cut your string, friend. But don't hurry. Take your time—take five minutes."

"Took this job yesterday. Figure to still have it tomorrow," Dave said quietly.

Darby affected a pained surprise and turned back to Pete.

"Why, he doesn't believe me! He thinks I'm just talking. Maybe you'd better argue with him, Pete."

The grin on Pete's face widened. He swung one ponderous leg over the cantle and stepped down to the ground and wordlessly handed his reins to Darby.

Darby's own reins were in his left hand, and with his right he reached for Pete's. His fingers closed around the oiled leather, and in that instant Dave Morgan made his bid.

Darby's horse stood at right angles to Dave's mount, six feet away and directly in front of him. Pete was on the far side of Darby, one hand upraised with the proffered reins, when Dave drove home his spurs.

Dave's nervous young horse lunged wildly forward under the sudden, unexpected bite of steel in his flanks. He slammed into Darby's mount just forward of the withers, moving forward with such speed that his momentum carried him up and half across the other horse's neck.

Dave let the shock of the impact catapult him forward against the unprepared Darby. His shoulder caught the smaller man in the side of the head and his arm closed around the thin neck and the two men spilled over the side of the horse on top of Pete, who stood with his arm still upraised and the grin still on his face.

Even Pete's massive strength could not withstand the weight of two men crashing unexpectedly against his chest. He staggered backward and his heels caught and he came down on his back in a bone-jarring fall with the two men on top of him.

Dave had the advantage of having known what was coming, and he was the first to recover. His left arm was still clamped around Darby's neck and he

brought his right hand around in a savage smash against the man's temple. Darby went limp and Dave dropped him like a broken doll and twisted aside in time to avoid Pete's lunge.

Pete was not grinning now. His head seemed sunken even further between his bull-like shoulders. He faced his enemy across the body of his unconscious pardner, and on his flat face was an expression of pure animal rage.

DAVE knew that once Pete's huge body was fairly launched it would constitute an almost unstoppable force. Pete would fight with the single-minded purpose of bearing his enemy to the ground, where his great weight would give him an insurmountable advantage. He would fight as an animal fights, merciless and without quarter, with death or crippling the penalty for defeat.

Pete's hands opened and closed spasmodically. From his cavernous chest came a low, rumbling growl like the distant sound of an angry range bull. He took two shuffling steps sideways around the body of his pardner.

Dave did not wait. His saddle-toughened legs drove his hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle forward with a speed that caught Pete wholly unprepared. He drove his left hand into the thick belly to bring down his opponent's guard, and brought his right hand around with all his weight in a smashing drive at the wide jaw.

The blow landed solidly. Pain lanced up his arm, and his hand felt as though he had slammed it into a rock wall. He hooked his left once more into Pete's middle, and then he was in close enough to use his elbows and knees in the vicious frontier style.

Pete withstood the first hard blow to his head with no visible effect. But it had confused his timing and his huge left fist failed to land squarely and skidded along the side of Dave's neck, leaving a long red welt of scraped skin as it went. The great arm crooked and closed like a vise and his right hand shot forward and closed around Dave's face, the blunt, powerful fingers searching for the eyes.

Dave knew he had to break that grip and break it quick. He caught Pete's thick wrist with both hands to keep the fingers from his eyes and raked the sharp heel of his boot down Pete's shin and drove it into the tender instep with all of his weight behind it. The strangling grip on his neck eased a little, and he brought his right knee into Pete's groin with a vicious force that brought a howl of pure animal agony from the other man. The arm around his neck relaxed even more, and he thrust forward and up with all his strength and broke the hold to come up between Pete's reaching arms.

His shoulder was directly under Pete's chin, and he dropped it three inches for leverage and then brought it up violently. Pete's jaws cracked together and his head snapped back and for a brief instant the soft underpart of his throat was exposed. Dave's forearm shot forward with wicked speed and Pete's wild roaring abruptly chopped off in a strangled gurgle.

Pete's arms dropped and he tilted slightly forward. His breathing was a harsh, rasping sound and his eyes held a vague emptiness. Dave took a casual step back, coolly examined the big man, and brought the hard edge of his hand down like an axe across the side of the thick neck.

PETE leaned further forward and crashed full length on the prairie sod. His fingers clutched spasmodically at the curly buffalo grass, and then abruptly relaxed and he was completely still but for the harsh sound of his breathing.

Dave stood where he was, pulling the air deep into his lungs. There was a small sound behind him and he twisted around with panther-like agility and then relaxed sheepishly. He had completely forgotten the presence of Eby.

Eby's smooth, boyish face was a study in astonishment. His gun was in his right hand, the hand resting on the pommel and the knuckles showing white from the tension of his grip.

"You're a—a little sudden," he said. He seemed to become aware for the first time that he was still holding the gun, and he flushed and rammed it back into the holster. He said abruptly, "I'll get your pony," and rode off to pick up Dave's horse, which had gone some two hundred yards in his first fright before the trailing reins stopped him.

Dave used the few minutes of waiting to roll a cigarette with fingers that still trembled slightly. He accepted the reins when Eby returned with a murmured, "Thanks," and swung into the saddle and rode off without a backward glance at the two men on the ground.

Eby caught up and rode for fifty yards in silence. He glanced back at the two motionless bodies and asked, "Are we—you reckon we'd ought to just leave them laying there?"

Dave looked at him in surprise. The ragged edge of temper still washed through him like a poisonous tide.

"Hell yes, we leave them there! You want to take them home and tuck them in their little beds?" He received no answer, and presently his temper cooled and he was disgusted with himself. He said, "Sorry, no call to run off at the head that way. They'll be all right. Little sick for a day or two, maybe, that's about all."

Eby nodded. He seemed to bear no grudge for the short answer he had received, but as the day wore on he was unusually silent, and he glanced frequently at the tall, dark man who rode beside him. The brief glances held a good deal of curiosity—and a shade of something that could have been doubt.

III

IT WAS coming onto early dusk when Dave and Eby rode into the home ranch yard. They took care of their tired horses and headed with hungry impatience to the wash-bench. Eby went through his routine in silence, and then, still silently and with a blandly innocent expression on his face, held out the large pink comb toward his dark companion.

Dave looked at the comb in surprise. Half indignantly he said, "Why hell, I don't—" and broke off. Abruptly he grinned and took the comb and crouched in front of the little mirror.

Frank Lee and his daughter were having their after-supper coffee when Dave and Eby walked in. Nancy arose and picked up their empty cups and carried them to the work table.

She said over her shoulder, "You're late this evening. You'll get a warmed over supper."

She put the cups down and turned around and her glance settled on Dave's damp and neatly combed head. Her eyes widened in apparent surprise.

"Why, Mr. Morgan! What *have* you done to yourself? You look so—so *different!*"

Dave said uncomfortably, "I, uh—nothing, Ma'am," and abruptly sat down.

He could feel the blood rushing to his face and sat with downcast eyes, inwardly cursing himself for a weak-minded coward without the brains and courage to face up to a mere slip of a yellow-haired girl. It had not yet occurred to Dave Morgan what was happening to him.

Frank Lee glanced at his daughter with mild curiosity. His eyes moved to Dave and he saw the raw, angry-looking scrape along the side of Dave's neck. He started to speak, changed his mind, and looked at Eby. There was a question in his eyes.

Eby caught the look and the fun went out of his face. He tried to keep his voice casual, but he was not entirely successful and a youthful excitement crept in.

"Met a couple of Rafter H boys this morning. Pete Morrel and Darby Burnett."

"They give you any trouble?" Frank Lee asked quickly.

"Well, no," Eby drawled, and this time he achieved the casual effect he was after. "I reckon you might say it was the other way around."

Eby was enjoying himself. He was a good storyteller, and he kept his audience in suspense until the last sentence.

Dave sat in embarrassed silence. He

wished Eby would hurry up and get it over with and stop making it sound like the battle that won the Civil War.

Nancy stood frozen in facinated immobility beside the stove. Her eyes grew wider until they were no longer blue, but velvet black pools of unreadable darkness.

Frank Lee sat on the front edge of his chair. A small, wicked smile spread gradually over his face and his eyes were like two chips of blue ice.

Eby finally concluded his story with—"We got on our ponies and went on about our business."

Old Frank drew a deep breath and sat back in his chair. "Now there's a brawl I'd've given my half interest in hell to've seen!" He looked curiously at Dave and asked, "Thought you told me you weren't a fighting man, son?"

Dave said carefully, "Don't recall saying that."

The old rancher frowned. "I thought you—" he said and stopped. "Yes, of course. It was packing a gun you didn't like."

"That's right," Dave said, and left it there.

OLD FRANK didn't answer. He waited in thoughtful silence while the younger men finished their meal. When they had pushed aside their plates and settled back with their coffee he said casually, "By the way, Morgan, we'll be bringing the fall beef out of the badlands shortly. That country is plumb rough on the ponies's feet, I reckon it'd be a good idea to put shoes on the whole bunch."

Dave nodded. "You want it done right away?"

"Well, sure. Might as well be ready." Frank refused to meet Dave's eyes.

"All right," Dave said mildly. "I'll get at it first thing in the morning."

He knew why he was being confined to work around the ranch. Obviously Frank Lee wanted to keep him out of the way of the Rafter H hands until their tempers had had a little time to cool. Privately, Dave didn't think much of the idea; Pete and Darby hadn't struck him as being men with a tendency to forget and forgive.

For the next three days Dave sweated and swore in the round corral, nailing the soft-iron plates on the string of rebellious, wild-eyed horses. Most of them had never been shod before, and like all broncs they were touchy and shy about their feet. They tried to rear and strike and bite when he worked on their front feet, and they did their best to kick his ribs in when he got around to the hind.

He countered by tying a foot up with a short rope and letting them fight the rope to a stand-still before beginning the careful job of trimming and rasping the hoof to a flat surface in preparation for the shoe. It was hot, hard, and exasperating work, and when he finally finished the job, in the middle of the afternoon of the third day, his temper was growing short.

He took the hackamore off the last horse and watched it trot away, its head high and swinging from side to side, and its feet lifting awkwardly and unnaturally high. With sudden decision, he hung the hackamore on the corral gate and started toward the house.

He found Frank Lee and Nancy in the big living room. Without preamble he said, "Just finished the last of them. If there's nothing else pushing this afternoon I reckon I'll ride into town. There's a few things I need." He didn't realize that he sounded almost belligerent.

"Why—" Frank stopped when he caught the look on Dave's face. "Sure, sure, Dave, go ahead. You need any money?"

"No, thanks, I reckon I've got all I'll need." He hesitated a moment then added, "Well, I'll see you," and turned toward the door.

Abruptly Nancy said, "Wait—wait a minute, Mr. Morgan." She hurried across the room and stopped directly in front of him. "I wonder if you'd mind taking the buckboard so I could go with you? I need a few things from town, too. I was just going to ask father before you came in." She stood gazing up at him.

LOOKING down at her, Dave found himself wondering how anyone could look so angelically innocent and at the same time tell such a windy. He knew she was only going with him in the belief that her presence would keep any Rafter H hands they met from starting trouble. For a brief moment it angered him that she should thus force him into the appearance of hiding behind a woman's skirts, but as he continued looking into her eyes his anger evaporated and he found himself fearing she would change her mind.

"Why, sure, ma'am, I'd be glad to," he said, then added more reluctantly, "but maybe your father would rather take you."

Old Frank gave a startled grunt and reared up in his chair. "Huh? Who, me? Hell, no, boy! Makes my leg ache just to think of riding in one of them things." He waved an arm cheerfully. "You go ahead, boy. I've got to stay here and study these here market reports."

He leaned back in his chair and picked up a copy of the 'Stockman's Journal' and began to leaf through it industriously.

Womanlike, now that she had gained her point, Nancy held back a bit on the halter.

"Well, of course if neither of you will take me, I suppose I could wait until Eby goes. I'm sure he'd be glad to."

Dave said hastily, "Oh, no, ma'am! You wouldn't want to go with Eby. Why, he's plumb reckless, ma'am, you might have a runaway, or most anything."

She hesitated a moment. She said demurely, "Well, if you insist, I suppose—"

There was a muffled snort from old Frank that drew a glance from his daughter's blue eyes that changed the snort into a strangled cough and he retreated behind the folds of the 'Stockman's Journal.'

Nancy looked back at Dave. "It'll only take me a few minutes to get ready. Just call when you have the team hooked up."

Dave could not remember later what they talked about on the eight-mile trip to Crow Butte, but by the time they turned into the town's dusty main street she was calling him Dave and he had graduated from the more formal 'ma'am' to a friendlier 'Miss Nancy.' He tied the team to the tierack in front of McKay's General Merchandise, and leaving Nancy to do her shopping at her leisure, crossed the street to the town's only drinking establishment, the Stockman's bar.

The big barroom was dim and cool and nearly deserted. At the far end of the long bar two young cowpunchers rested their elbows on the polished mahogany and argued the merits of a bronc called Apache with whisky-inspired heat. They offered to back their opinions with sums that would have represented ten years income for either of them, apparently on the theory that the more money offered, the more convincing the argument. With each drink the bets grew larger.

The white-aproned bartender shuffled down the bar to take Dave's order. He looked pained.

DAVE grinned at him and nodded toward the two loud-voiced punchers. "Looks like the boys'll have to stage themselves a rodeo."

"Ah, hell. They come in here once a month regular and go through it all over again. Time they finish that bottle they'll be up to ten thousand." He used his towel vigorously on the already-clean bar then added disgustedly, "And then they'll have to take up a collection to pay for the damn bottle!" His expression changed and he studied Dave with sudden interest. He said, "Say, ain't you the man that hired out with old Frank Lee?"

"That's right," Dave answered.

The bartender reached under the bar and brought out a shot-glass and set it in front of Dave. He said with elaborate casualness, "Reckon you know this place belongs to Wade Hyatt."

Equally casual, Dave said, "Didn't before. Do now. How about something to go with that glass?"

The bartender placed a bottle in front of Dave almost reluctantly. "Ain't many of Frank's hands ever done their drinking here."

Dave said cheerfully, "Well, if friend Hyatt's whisky is as bad as his morals I reckon you can't blame 'em." He filled the glass and turned sideways to face the front of the room, where he could watch McKay's store entrance through the big front window.

He was feeling better. The last three days of staying quietly at the ranch had irritated him. It had amounted to hiding out in fear of retribution, and his pride had rankled. He had now demonstrated that he was not going to crawl into a hole, and he felt more like a man. He had a second drink and paid for it and stepped outside just as Nancy appeared in the doorway across the street.

She was followed by a young clerk whose slight frame was almost obscured by the bundles and boxes he carried. Dave hurried across the street and helped the clerk pack the parcels in the back of the buckboard.

He helped Nancy to her seat and said with mock seriousness, "Looks like I should have brought the freight wagon. You planning on a long winter?"

"And all the things you needed? I don't seem to see—" she broke off abruptly and her eyes were fixed on a horseman coming down the street. She recovered her composure almost immediately and added quietly, "Untie the team, will you Dave? And let's go."

He made no move to comply. He said mildly, "Wade Hyatt?"

She said nervously, "Yes. Yes, and I don't want to—" but it was already too late, the rider was upon them.

IV

WADE HYATT was a handsome man, but there was about him a suppressed sense of violence that made him some way uncomfortable to be near. He was only a little above average height, and slenderly built, and yet there was a feeling of power about him. Even relaxed in the saddle, his wiry body held a disturbing promise of sudden and violent activity.

His hair was so light a yellow it was almost white, and his eyes, appropriately enough, were blue. But his skin, contrary to the very blond man's tendency to burn and peel and burn again, was a deep, clear brown. It was a striking face that would have been unusually attractive had it not been for the expression in his light eyes; an expression of absolute and unrestricted arrogance.

He drew rein with his horse's shoulder almost touching the buckboard beside Nancy, forcing Dave to move back to avoid being stepped on. He didn't bother to glance at the man he had shouldered aside.

"This is a break, Miss Nancy. If I'd known you were in town I'd have hurried it up a bit. Not going anywhere, I hope?"

"Sorry, Mr. Hyatt. We're just now starting home," she replied.

He said easily, "Now, that's not a friendly way to act when I haven't seen you for so long. I reckon you've got time to step over to the Hearney House with me for a cup of coffee."

"I don't think you understood me, Mr. Hyatt. I said we were starting home." Nancy turned to Dave and said, "Please untie them, Dave, and we'll be going."

Abruptly Hyatt's easy manner vanished and the blood rushed to his face. He tensed in the saddle and his voice was ugly.

"Dave, is it! For a girl that's got no time for her neighbors you're sure damn quick getting familiar with a no-good drifter!" He leaned suddenly forward and his hand closed around her arm. "You listen to me, girl. The day ain't far off when you're going to wish to hell you hadn't been so high-headed."

Dave stepped between Hyatt's horse and the buckboard. His actions were so deliberate they seemed almost slow, and yet the whole thing was over so quickly that Nancy was never sure exactly what had happened.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Dave said, and his big hand shot up and closed like a vise on Wade Hyatt's wrist. The corded muscles in his forearm bulged. Wade's grip

broke and his mouth opened in a soundless gasp and his other hand swept back instinctively for his gun.

Dave didn't give him time to reach it. His powerful shoulders jerked backward and Wade shot headfirst out of the saddle. Dave's free hand slammed forward and his big fist crashed into the side of the oncoming blond man's head with the dull sound of a club striking a sack of wet sand.

Momentarily the blow seemed to halt Wade's descent in midair, and then his lithe body went limp and he fell face down in the dusty street with the boneless abandon of a rag doll.

Dave stood looking down at him for a moment and then leaned casually against the side of the buckboard and reached into his pocket for the makings. He glanced up at Nancy.

"Sure sorry I had to do that in front of you, Miss Nancy, but the man seemed plumb fresh out of manners."

She said distractedly, "I—it's all right, I mean." Then with sudden intensity she added, "What are you waiting for?"

"Why, I reckon he'll be coming around after a bit, and likely he'll want to apologize."

"No! I mean he's got a gun and he'll try to—" Nancy ran out of breath and stopped. She added pleadingly, "Dave! Please. Let's go."

He looked up and met the terror in her eyes and made his decision.

"Why sure, I reckon if that's the way you want it, Miss Nancy."

THE buckboard was two miles out of town before either of them spoke, and then it was Nancy who broke the long silence.

"Dave, are you—I suppose you'll have to leave us now."

He turned to her in astonishment. He said, "Leave you? What gave you that idea?"

"Why he—he'll kill you, Dave. He's got such a terrible temper and you humiliated him in front of the whole town," she said.

"I reckon not. I don't carry a gun and he knows it. If he cuts down on me he's going to hang for it, and I reckon even his temper ain't that bad."

She spoke vehemently. "But he will. You don't know him like I do, he's not human. You've got to protect yourself."

He merely shrugged, and in her agitated condition his indifference seemed to infuriate her. She accused him wildly. "You're afraid to carry a gun!" and was instantly contrite, "Oh no, Dave. I didn't mean that. Forgive me, I didn't know what I was saying."

Dave kept his eyes on the sweaty, bobbing backs of the team ahead of him. He knew her apology was sincere, and yet the accusation had not surprised him. He had always known that there would be people who would attribute his unarmed condition to cowardice, and it had never seemed to matter. But now it was someway vitally important that this blue-eyed girl should not think him afraid.

He flipped the lines against the off horse's rump to bring up the sagging double-tree.

"Two years ago I was quite a hand with a gun myself. My younger brother and I had a small place down south of here and we ran into trouble a good deal like you've got. One of the boys on the other side tried the same trick with me that Darby pulled on Eby the other day, only thing was, he thought I was a green hand and he ended up six feet under ground."

His voice trailed off into silence, and presently Nancy prompted softly, "And you regret having shot him?"

His eyes held a blank, unseeing look, and his voice was so low she had to strain to hear it.

"No. No, I reckon that wasn't it. But the man had a pardner, and this pardner caught my kid brother alone in town one day and called him out on the street and killed him."

"Oh! I'm sorry."

He didn't seem to hear her. He added quietly, "So—I don't believe in settling things with guns anymore."

Looking at his set face she said helplessly, "But you, it wasn't your—"

He interrupted her almost harshly. "I reckon it was. If I hadn't been packing a gun that day I couldn't have been crowded into a gun-fight—and my kid brother'd likely be alive today."

"Maybe," she said. "But you can't believe that evil men should be permitted to enforce their will on a country simply because the honest men refuse to protect themselves?"

Dave shrugged. The abrupt, almost fierce intensity of the moment before had left him, and he seemed merely tired. He said indifferently, "There's always the law."

"The law! Wade Hyatt is ruining my father, and what can the law do to stop him? He can shoot you down in cold blood, and then the law can hang him, but what good will that do you?"

Dave glanced sideways at her indignant face. He shook off the depression that gripped him with an almost visible effort. A slow smile gradually lighted his dark face.

"Well, maybe not much for me, Miss Nancy, but it sure would put a kink in friend Wade's rope."

His answer was exasperating and she turned her back on him and sat staring fixedly at the rolling prairie, her body rigid with outraged dignity that refused to argue further with such an unreasonable opponent.

Dave returned his attention to the team. He knew that something about his last remark had irritated her, but for the life of him he could not figure out what it was. He guessed he still had a good deal to learn about women.

THE buckboard rolled into the ranch yard just after dark, and Nancy jumped down from her seat and walked toward the house without a backward glance, leaving Dave to follow with the awkward load of bundles. In the living room she indicated where to put his burden with a nod of her head and acknowledged his assistance with a cool, "Thank you, Mr. Morgan."

He said, "Why sure, ma'am," and lingered a moment in the hope that she would say something more. Nothing was forthcoming, and he went, with some reluctance, back to the team waiting in the yard.

The inside of the big barn was nearly dark, with only a little starlight reflected through the big double doors. He could have gone back to the house for a lantern, but for a reason that he did not stop to analyze he chose not to. Unharnessing and rubbing down the buggy team, done almost entirely by feel, was a slow task, and by the time he finally finished and turned them out into the pasture behind the corrals he was vaguely disturbed that he had not yet heard the bell summoning him to supper.

He crossed the yard to the bunkhouse and found that building in darkness with no sign of Eby. It occurred to him that Eby was probably in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking with Frank Lee while Nancy prepared a late supper. For a moment he was tempted to join them, and then he changed his mind and sat down on the doorstep and rolled a cigarette. He leaned comfortably against the door frame, enjoying the sense of leisure and waiting for the supper bell.

The cigarette was down to a stub and he was beginning to grow uneasy when the back door opened and Frank Lee's slight body was outlined against the lamplight. The old man peered into the night with light-blinded eyes and called, "Morgan! Where are you?"

There was something in the old rancher's voice that brought Dave to his feet in one swift motion and sent him hurrying across the yard. He stepped into the circle of light by the back door and said briefly, "With you," and followed the older man into the kitchen.

Nancy was beside the stove, lifting the heavy, enameled coffeepot to the top of the warming oven. There was no sign of Eby. Dave met the old rancher's eyes. "Where's Eby?" he asked.

Frank Lee said, "I reckon that's what I wanted to see you about. He rode into town this afternoon. Allowed you might

have run into trouble and need some help."

The voice was casual, but the old man's eyes were not, and Dave realized that he was trying to avoid alarming his daughter.

"Odd thing we didn't meet him," Dave said, in a casual tone.

"Not so odd. There's several places a man can save time by cutting across country, places a buckboard can't go."

"What time did he go?" Dave asked.

The old rancher answered indirectly. "Well, considering the time you pulled in here, and the time he started, I reckon he must've got to town a few minutes after you drove out of it."

A HARD knot was slowly forming in the pit of Dave's stomach.

"Well, likely wouldn't hurt anything if I was to drift in and find out." He took his hat off the peg beside the door with a show of indifference and added, "Reckon I might as well pick up a pony and sort of look around a bit."

Nancy said with asperity, "You'll do no such a thing. You haven't had anything to eat yet. You can just hang that hat back up and sit down!"

Dave stopped in momentary indecision. He didn't want to alarm her any more than necessary, and yet there was no time to spare. Wade Hyatt would be in an ugly mood, and Eby had unknowingly ridden into a dangerous situation. If it were not already too late, every minute could be vitally important.

"Now, Miss Nancy. I haven't—" Dave broke off at the sound of horse's hooves coming into the yard.

Frank said with relief, "That'll be Eby now." He relaxed, only to tighten up again a moment later as the rattle of a buggy could be heard above the sound of hooves. "Wait here," he said and started for the front door as the hard-driven buggy pulled to a halt with a rusty squeal of brakes.

A voice called out, "Hello, the house."

The two in the kitchen heard the front door open and a brief, indistinguishable murmur of voices. A few moments later Frank came back into the kitchen followed by another man.

The second man was about Lee's height and age, but he was at least twice as heavy, and his round body looked awkward and soft compared with the lean frame of the old rancher. His pale blue eyes held a troubled look, and he was breathing rapidly.

He nodded to Nancy and said with the ease of long familiarity, "Evening, Nancy. Sure is a dark night for an old codger like me to be ramming around the country."

Frank Lee indicated Dave with a wave of his hand. "Dave Morgan, Ben," and added to Dave, "Ben Latimore, marshal of Crowe Butte."

The two men exchanged brief nods of acknowledgment, and the marshal sat down heavily in a chair beside the table.

"Guess there ain't no sense in beating around the bush. Darby Burnett shot your man Eby this afternoon."

Nancy gasped and her eyes grew round and dark in her suddenly pale face.

Dave neither moved nor changed expression, but the hard knot in his belly drew a little tighter.

Frank Lee took a deep breath and asked softly, "Dead?"

"No," the marshal said, "not dead. He was hit twice. One bullet through his arm just below the elbow, and the other one under his ribs on the right side. Doc Landon says he's got a better than even chance of pulling through it."

"How did it happen?" Frank asked.

"Well," the marshal said, "Darby Burnett and Pete Morrel rode into town just a few minutes after Nancy and Morgan here, drove out. In fact they got there in time to help pack Hyatt into the Stockman's bar. Wade was still feeling considerable sick. Eby rode in a bit later and asked after you folks, when he heard you'd left he allowed he'd have a drink before he went home."

Nancy burst in vehemently, "Why didn't someone warn him?"

"He's a grown man, Nancy, with a mind of his own," the marshal said and met her

indignant gaze. "Anyway, I wasn't there. Didn't know anything about it 'til I heard the shooting."

"I suppose you've got Burnett in jail where he belongs?" said Nancy.

"Now, Nancy. It was a quarrel and Eby went for his gun, too. I reckon it was a fair fight."

"A fair fight," she cried. "Eby's hardly more than a boy, and Darby Burnett's a professional gunman. He's a—it was murder."

UNDER cover of her outburst, Dave quietly eased open the door beside him and slipped out into the night. Behind him he heard Frank Lee call his name, but he paid no attention, continuing swiftly across the hard-packed yard toward the barn.

In the dark interior of the barn he felt his way to the stall where the wrangling horse was tied. Quickly untying the animal, he led it outside where the bright stars furnished a reasonable amount of light. It was the work of but a few moments to saddle up, and then he stepped on and rode at a brisk trot to the bunkhouse.

As he stepped down from the saddle in front of the door a dim form moved forward from the shadow of the building.

"Dave, what are you going to do?" Nancy asked.

He felt a brief regret that she had not stayed in the house a few minutes longer until he was on his way.

"I'm going into town."

She said tensely, "Why?"

He knew instinctively that it would be no use to lie to her.

"Why, I reckon I'm going in to see friend Darby."

"Dave! They'll kill you!"

"I reckon not," he said and got no reply. The silence between them began to grow uncomfortable and he said abruptly, "Will you hold my pony, Miss Nancy? I'll only be a minute." He handed her the reins and stepped through the door into the bunkhouse.

In the darkness he moved to his bunk and felt on the shelf above it for the canvas roll that contained his personal belongings. He laid the roll on the bunk and opened it, and when he put his hand among the contents, the first thing he felt was the smooth, cedar butt of the gun.

His fingers closed around the holster as he picked it up and the wide belt with its heavy brass burden uncoiled behind it like a thick snake. He stood for a long moment staring into the darkness, and then with sudden decision, buckled the heavy belt around his waist and bent to fasten the tie-down things that hung from the tip of the holster. He straightened a moment later and walked toward the door and there was no longer any hesitation in his walk.

He came out of the door and stopped beside Nancy in the yard.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said and held out his hand.

She kept a tight grip on the reins and moved closer, until she was almost touching him. She said softly, "Dave, if I asked you—" and broke off as she became aware of the silhouetted flare of the gun and the faint gleam of cartridges in the wide belt. She took a quick step backward. "No! Dave, you can't. They'll kill you. They—they're gunmen, Dave—they're deadly with their guns."

He said calmly, "So am I." His voice held no note of bragging, it was a simple statement of fact.

She moved closer to him, so that she had to tip her head back to look into his face. She laid a soft hand on his arm and her voice was pleading.

"Dave, you said guns were not the way. Don't do it and we'll go away. It's not worth it." Her control failed her and she repeated brokenly, "It's not worth it!"

LOOKING down at her strained face he felt a wave of compassion go through him that was almost like physical pain.

"I was wrong, Nancy. Once I shot a man and his pardner killed my brother and I blamed it on myself. But what I failed to see was that such men will de-

stroy what stands in their way—with or without a reason. As they have Eby, who had done them no harm. And they keep on destroying until they are stopped. I'm going to stop them."

"But why you, Dave? Why you?"

"Because I can. Honest ranchers are rarely gunmen, and in that lies the strength of men like Wade Hyatt. They play the game as they did with your father, with nothing the law can lay a hand on. And when a brave man refuses to run, as Eby did, they work on him and goad him and insult him until in desperation he goes for a gun—and then they kill him. And because he tried for a gun the law calls it an even break instead of the murder it was." His voice became suddenly grim. "They're great hands for a fair fight—they're about due to get one!"

In the dim starlight her eyes were velvet pools of darkness that searched his face for a sign of weakness. Abruptly her hand dropped from his arm and her head bowed.

"You're going, aren't you," she said. It was not a question, it was statement of fact.

He said gently, "I'm sorry, Nancy, I'm going."

For a long moment her body drooped in defeat, and then the pride in her brought her head up and her body straightened.

"You're going, and I can't make you stay because I don't know the words. I know it's silly to ask you to be careful, but—come back! Dave, don't let them—" Abruptly her voice broke and she wheeled and went toward the house in a stumbling run.

He stood like a dark statue watching after her, until the door opened in a rectangle of light to admit her slight form and then closed, leaving blackness behind it. A moment longer he stood, and then with a single fluid motion, caught the horn of the saddle and swung up and sent the powerful bay gelding hurtling across the yard in a thundering run.

Behind him the suddenly opened door cast its pathway of light across the ground and Frank Lee's shouted call drifted and faded into the night, "Morgan! Morgan!" and then there was only the sound of the horse's thundering hooves beneath him and the rush of the night wind past his head.

VI

A MILE from the outskirts of Crow Butte, Dave pulled the sweating bay down to a trot and then to a walk. He was not aware of any particular nervousness, and yet he was realist enough to know how small a chance he had of walking away alive from the coming fight. It was going to take everything he had of skill and luck to bring off even that thin chance, and so he rode the last mile at a walk, flexing his arms and shoulders to take the tension from them, and consciously forcing his mind into an attitude of detached coolness.

The tie-rack in front of the Stockman's bar was lined with a solid row of horses, standing hip-shot in the dark coolness and waiting their master's pleasure with a dumb patience. Dave stepped off at the end of the line, beyond the pathway of light reflected from the bar's big front window, and tied the bay to the end post. He dropped his hand to the cedar butt of his gun and moved it up and down, checking it for position and making sure that it moved freely in the holster. He let go of the gun butt and stepped up onto the board walk and moved toward the bat-wing doors of the Stockman's bar.

He pushed the doors aside with his shoulder and took two steps inside and came to a stop, his feet planted slightly apart and his body leaned a little forward. His body looked relaxed, even indolent, but there was nothing casual about the gray eyes that swept the room in a single glance and came to rest on the three men standing together at the middle of the long bar—Wayde Hyatt, the huge Pete Morrel, and the murderous little gunman, Darby Burnett.

For a long moment nobody noticed his entrance, and then the bartender, reach-

ing for a bottle on the back bar, saw him. The man froze instantly, his arm still outstretched for the bottle and a look of total disbelief stamped on his face.

The bartender's unnatural pose drew other men's attention, and the steady hum of conversation faltered and trailed to a stop, so that even the dullest man present became aware that something was happening and looked around to see what it was.

Thirty seconds after he came through the door, Dave found himself facing a silent room filled with watching faces. He knew that his presence here meant nothing to many of them, and yet some sixth sense—or the fixed intensity of his eyes—seemed to warn them, for almost imperceptibly the crowd edged back and away from the three men who held his gaze.

Dave neither moved nor spoke. He kept his attention fixed on the three men, trying to read what went on in their minds. Pete's wide face showed a mild surprise that flattened and changed to anger as memory came to his slow brain. He took a step away from the bar and was stopped by Hyatt's hand on his arm.

Darby Burnett's face was a picture of joyous incredulity, as though he could hardly believe that fate had thus delivered into his hands the opportunity to avenge the injury his pride had suffered at the hands of this man. The tip of a pointed tongue slipped out to moisten his thin lips, making his sharp face look more than ever like a fox. He leaned slightly forward, and his small body seemed to quiver with the tenseness of a terrier awaiting the word to go.

Of the three men, only Wade Hyatt showed no surprise. The man's egotism was such that the doings of other men could hardly interest him, let alone surprise him. In his eyes there was nothing but bold arrogance and a faint satisfaction.

"So you came back to push your luck a little farther. You're a fool," he said coldly.

Dave laughed at him.

"If you were as wide across the horns as you are across the mouth, Hyatt, I might be that."

His tone was as deliberately insulting as he could make it. He knew that a man driven by unreasoning anger is seldom as dangerous as a man acting with calm judgment, and he sought to break Wade Hyatt's cold detachment.

"Do you always hire your murdering done, Hyatt, or do you pack that gun for a reason?" he added, tauntingly.

WADE HYATT took one step away from the bar and stopped. The cold arrogance had left his eyes and they held a pure, distilled viciousness that was appalling. The rage that filled him seemed to choke him, so that he had to try twice before he could speak.

"I pack it for a reason, cowboy? You curious to know why?"

Dave said irritatingly, "Just naturally busting with it, amigo."

"Then know!" Hyatt said and his hand plunged downward like a striking hawk.

From the moment he spoke, Dave had known what was going to happen. With a gunman's almost psychic vision he had seen the decision in Wade Hyatt's eyes, and he made his break only a split second behind his blond opponent.

To the crowded pack of watching men, Dave's draw was too fast to follow. One moment he was standing, apparently relaxed, with his hands hanging empty at his sides. And the next instant his right hand was at belt level with a long black Colt erupting in a cataclysm of yellow flame and thunderous sound.

At Wade Hyatt's break Darby Burnett fell away to the right, his hand streaking downward in the same movement. The skin on his small face was stretched tight, so that it looked yellow and shiny, like the shrinking, drying hide of a skull. His lips were parted, with the tip of his pointed ink tongue caught between his teeth, and his eyes held a gittering, feverish excitement that bordered on madness.

Pete Morrell stood planted solidly, one

step advanced from the bar where Wade's hand had stopped him. His thick legs were slightly spread, giving his massive body the appearance of being as solid and unyielding as a rooted oak. He had listened to Dave and Hyatt with sullen indifference, but when the moment came his apathy vanished, and he went for his gun with almost incredible speed for a man of his bulk.

Dave felt the solid smash of the Colt's recoil against his palm, and even in that moment of desperate urgency, a curiously detached part of his mind seemed to stand apart and marvel at the instinct, neglected for two years, that had brought the gun into his hand without conscious thought. He saw the tell-tale jet of dust spurt from the breast of Wade Hyatt's coat, and the blond outlaw chief slammed back against the bar under the impact of the heavy bullet.

There was no time to see if the one shot had been enough, and no time to waste another in making sure. He swung the long gun on Darby and fired and knew he had shot too fast and missed. He thumbed the hammer again with desperate haste, and felt the big gun jump in his hand and at the same instant a black-shot burst of orange flame bloomed at the muzzle of Darby's gun.

It seemed to Dave that a giant hand had caught him by the arm and spun him around. He heard Darby scream, the sound high and thin and more animal than human, in fear and shock. With the scream came the sudden roar of Pete's gun, adding its sullen thunder to the sound-shattered room.

Dave was off balance and in a poor position to return Pete's fire, but he had no choice. His sudden twist under the impact of Darby's bullet had confused the first shot, but the big man could hardly miss twice at such a range. Dave brought his gun across his body in a hurried, chopping shot, knowing the first one had to be good.

The heavy slug caught Pete squarely in the center of his massive chest. His huge body shuddered under the impact, and the hand holding the Colt sagged, but his thick legs stayed firmly planted and his stubborn body refused to yield. His gun began to rise again wtih a terrible deliberation, and his thumb was on the hammer when the second bullet hit him.

This time Pete staggered. The smashing impact of the slug carried him back until he came against the bar, and there he hung, dead on his feet but refusing to fall. The weight of the gun pulled his arm down, and his nerveless fingers betrayed him and the gun slipped from his grasp and clattered on the floor. He tipped his head slowly to stare down in dazed resentment at the offending hand, and as he stared the dull glow left his eyes and he died where he stood. Yet even in death his great body was slow to yield. He slipped quietly and slowly down the bar, coming to rest with his back against it, as though he had only lain down for a moment's rest.

DAVE straightened slowly and looked down with a curious intensity at his empty gun. Abruptly he rammed it back into the holster, as though the sight of it were distastful, and walked forward to the three men on the floor. He wasted hardly a glance on the still forms of Darby Burnett and Wade Hyatt, but his gaze lingered for a long time on the body of Pete Morrel.

The crowded pack of men behind him was silent and without movement, even their breathing stilled by the sudden violence of what they had seen. Only the bartender broke the stillness. He leaned forward over the bar to look at the three bodies on the other side. He made a noise in his throat and abruptly straightened up.

The drops of blood, dripping steadily from the ends of his fingers, drew Dave's attention. He dropped his eyes to the spreading circle of shining wetness on his sleeve. He moved the arm experimentally, and when it responded properly, seemed to lose interest and returned his gaze to Pete Morrel.

Abruptly he raised his head and looked directly at the bartender.

"He was the only one of the litter worth raising," he said, and turned and walked out of the door.

He stood on the board walk and breathed deeply of the cool night air, aware of a lessening of the dull apathy that gripped his mind, and hearing the rising clamor of voices in the saloon behind him.

It came to him that the peace he had purchased at the cost of three lives was only a transient thing; that as surely as day follows night, the day would come when another ruthless man would rise in Wade Hyatt's place. And when that day came he would once again find himself facing the spoilers across drawn guns—because he had this day proven that he could.

Doubt as to whether killing was ever worth the price was still in his mind, however, when the buckboard came into sight. It was only a dark outline against the dimly lighted street, yet he knew with utter certainty who it carried so swiftly toward him, and suddenly he knew that the price of bloodshed was never too great if it meant protecting something that was rightfully yours to have and to hold forever.

"Dave!" Nancy cried, and she came out of the buckboard into his arms. "I heard the shooting and—oh, Dave, you'll never know how scared I was for you!"

"I know," he said softly, and held her tight with his good arm. Then there was only the sweet-salty taste of her tears between them.

IS THE COUGAR KING OF HIS DOMAIN?

ONE of the surest ways of starting an argument around Western campfires is to bring up the subject of the cougar, or mountain lion. Controversy rages even over the proper common name. Cougar, mountain lion, puma, catamount, panther? And over its inclination to attack men, or not attack. Does the predator scream, or doesn't he? Is he a coward, or a brave animal that uses its brain power?

Another point of controversy arises over the relative prowess of the cougar and other Western mammals. In other words, is the cougar king of his domain?

The question hasn't been settled. But there are reports favoring both points of view.

One Idaho mountain man witnessed a fight between a black bear and a cougar. The gory battle raged on for better than an hour. Near the finale the bear headed up a pine tree. The cat pulled his enemy down. The mountaineer was convinced that the cougar was the winner.

Yet historical records reveal that the fur trappers and traders favored bears in such combats, particularly the extremely large grizzlies. The cats usually tried to avoid these creatures.

Records indicate that cougars prefer to avoid another vicious fighter—the savage plunderer of the Northlands, the wolverine. Although greatly outweighed, the wolverine, or *carcajou*, has bulldog strength and long, curved claws. One northwoods trapper reported finding a mutilated cougar. The only tracks leading away from the scene belonged to a wolverine.

The razor-sharp tusks of the wild pig, javelina, or peccary of the South and Southwest are highly respected by the lions, too. And with good reason—javelinas usually travel in family herds, and gang up on enemies.

What chance has big game such as deer, elk and moose? Not much, usually. There are instances, however, when the tables were turned on cougars attacking big game.

In the Idaho wilderness country, a giant bull elk managed to dislodge a cougar which pounced upon it. The elk pawed and antlered the predator to death. In Montana, a deer, a large buck, rolled off an incline to crush a cougar clinging to its back. The deer walked away, but the cougar lay dead, his flesh pounded by sharp hooves and raked with antlers.

Such cases are rare, however. Generally speaking, the cougar is king of the big game country. If he avoids trouble with bears and other potential enemies, it isn't because he is cowardly. He is merely using his feline intelligence!

—Ferris Weddle

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The Killer Laughed

The boy, Lukey, idolized the gunman—but one day he was forced to grow up and see things as they were

IN THE corral, the strange horse nickered at the April dawn, but the pine-dark mountains held back the sunrise.

Lukey, scrabbling to fill a tin dishpan with chips for a quick fire, felt the slippery frost on the wood, but his shivering was as much from thrill as from cold—Walt Devon, who had killed a man last night, was in the cabin.

The thin fuzz of boy's whiskers on Lukey's jaw was only a shade lighter than the tousled hair that grew long over his ears and neck. His shoulders were narrow and bony inside his blue cotton shirt, but the wrists sticking out from the shrunken sleeves were as thick and strong as a man's wrists, and as deft at looping a rope or holding a calf for branding as any mans. His hands were big and callused, but were very gentle in their touch on an animal.

Lukey looked up as the chickaree squirrel darted along the top log of the woodpile, then stopped to chatter with its bushy tail erect and forepaws together. This was the fifth morning the squirrel had come—he was taming it, all right.

"I'll bring you something to eat soon as

By L. D. GEUMLEK

I feed Walt," Lukey said softly. He knew his words didn't matter—it was just getting the squirrel used to his voice. "Walt's got the posse after him and he's depending on me. Sure a good thing Dad wasn't home last night."

Walt came outside then, stretching and yawning after his short sleep. He had pulled on his pants and boots, and was headed for the creek to wash up. Lukey noticed how he walked without swaying his shoulders. Walt's feet touched the ground lightly, almost like a cat's feet, ready to turn or dance aside at any sign of danger.

"I'll be back," Lukey told the squirrel. Carrying the chip pan, he held his shoulders steady, but the cat-soft walk eluded him, because of his heavy work shoes.

When Walt came in, the fire was snapping in the old iron stove, the smell of frying side pork filled the cabin and Lukey was mixing flapjacks.

"I went to fork some hay to my horse," Walt said, "but I saw you already did it." His voice was muffled as he pulled a green plaid shirt over his head. He buckled his gunbelt around his hips and Lukey grinned with admiration.

Walt sat down at the table as the flapjack batter sizled in the pan. "Don't you get lonesome up here, Lukey?"

"Oh, some. My dad keeps me working too hard to notice."

Walt's lip curled as his eyes took in the packing box shelves, the built-in bunks with dark wool blankets and straw mattresses. "I'd still be stuck in a dirty shack like this if I hadn't had the guts to get out."

"I'm not staying, either," Lukey said. "You want your eggs turned over? Soon as the old man can get somebody to help him, I'm moving on. How do these look?" setting the flapjacks on the table.

"Fine. Make those eggs straight up." Walt reached for the syrup jug. "Your pa agreeable to you going?"

"Nah," Lukey said. "He thinks I oughta work my fool self to death like him."

"Only dumbheads work," Walt said. "What'll he say when he hears I was here?" His hand, holding a forkful of flapjack, stopped in mid-air until Lukey answered.

"He'd put the posse on your trail quick as scat, but he won't be back from line camp until tomorrow night, and then he won't hear a thing from me. I'm your friend."

"I'm mighty glad you are." Walt bent to his eating. "I've always liked you, kid. You got more sense than the other dumbheads around here."

Lukey glowed.

EVER since he could remember, it seemed to him, he'd wanted to be like Walt Devon—a man who wore a gun and didn't take orders from anybody. Dad had always called Walt a no-good skallyhoot hanging around town looking for trouble, but Dad was wrong. Walt hated trouble. He'd hated what he'd had to do last night.

"So I told this Bowler guy to keep his dirty tongue quiet about nice girls and he went for his gun," Walt was explaining for the third time. "He had it halfway out of the holster before I even started my draw. I sure hated to do it, but it was him or me." Regretfully, Walt shook his head, then smacked his lips as he scraped half the side pork and eggs off the platter to his own plate.

Like in the old books Ma read to him before she died, Lukey thought, Walt ought to wear a plume in his hat and have a sword in his hand.

"You sure you won't say nothing about my being here?" Walt asked anxiously.

"They could picket me on an anthill," Lukey swore with the pancake turner raised in his right hand.

Walt nodded, pleased. "Someday when you need a friend, just let me know. I never let a friend down." He looked around the cabin again. "You want to get out of this dump, though."

"I'll have to practice my draw," Lukey said. "I'm pretty slow, but I can shoot awful straight." He could not resist building himself up. "I expect I can shoot straight as anybody. Even you, maybe."

"That' so?" Walt answered shortly.

"Look, Walt," Lukey said, "I'll put this grub in a flour sack for you to take along, but you better hurry. I bet that posse started long before daylight."

Walt's laugh was short and harsh. "They'll go chasing themselves over west of Sandrock, thinking I went down the river. I'll be in Canada before they figure it out. You go saddle up my horse while I finish eating, and don't worry about that dumbhead posse."

"I sure wish I was going with you," Lukey said enviously.

AS HE hurried to the corral, the squirrel darted to the top of the woodpile again.

"I'll be along in a minute," Lukey said.

In the corral, his own horse trotted up to him, but Walt's bay was skittish and had to be roped. As he threw the saddle on and tightened the cinch, Lukey resolved that it wouldn't be long until he was following the same trail. He'd be like Walt. He wasn't going to be a cow-nurse, a plodding dawn-to-dark rancher, sucked down into the mud by the weight of his own shoes. He'd make the name Lukey Shaw feared by evil-doers up and down the West.

He led the bay around in front of the cabin and stood rubbing its neck and shoulders until Walt came out, wearing his flat-crowned black hat set rakishly over one eye. Walt swung into the saddle, gathering the reins in his gloved left hand. He touched his hat brim with his right hand, then in one continuous flowing motion, his hand went down to his gun and up again, and he shot the squirrel off the woodpile.

The dying animal writhed and tumbled among the chips.

Walt shouted with laughter and slapped his thigh. "Can you shoot that straight, kid?"

Lukey watched Walt ride up the trail to the east, then he went slowly to the woodpile and picked up the torn body of the squirrel.

"There wasn't no need of that," he said softly. "He didn't get any food out of it. He just wanted to kill for fun. He laughed." Lukey held the squirrel a moment longer, then laid it on the top log and wiped his bloody fingers along his pants leg. "He thought it was funny to see something die."

Had he thought it was funny when Bowler died last night? For the first time, Lukey began to wonder why, if it was such an out and out case of self-defense, Walt had run. Had he laughed then, and would he laugh when he shot the next man? And the next—

Clumping his heavy shoes hard against the earth, Lukey went to the corral. It wouldn't take more than an hour to ride down to Sandrock.

They'd tell him there where to find the posse.

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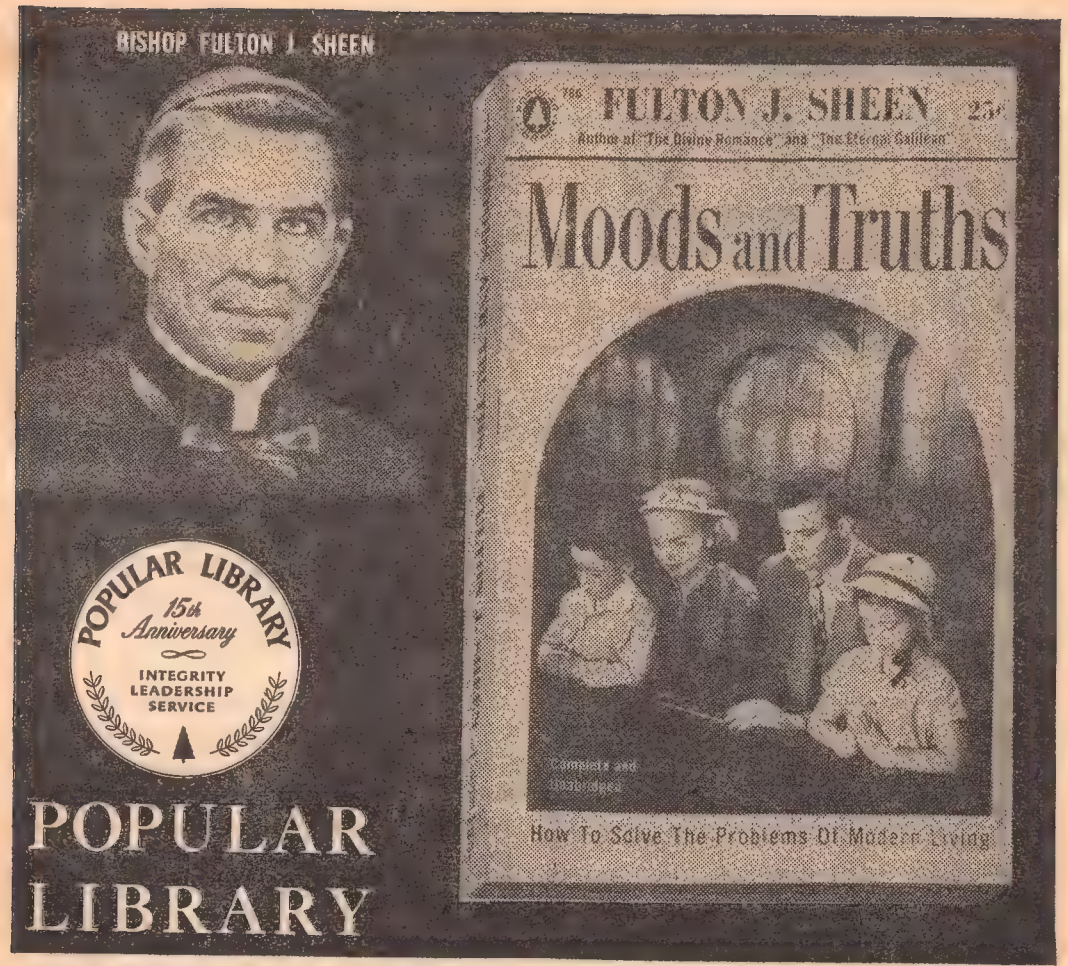

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Gamblers On Wheels

a true story by Bob and Jan Young

GAMBLERS never overlook the chance to trim a verdant sucker, no matter where he may stray. Legend persists most of the historic poker and other gambling games took place on riverboats or the "very splendid hells" of frontier towns. True, many high stake games were played in those places. But the itinerant sucker—and his name is legion—was also fleeced regularly when he boarded the wood-burning railroad cars which operated when America was young.

Dice had not come into popular use at that time; three-card monte was in disrepute, thus poker carried the gambler's freight. According to a contemporary account, written by an anonymous gambler May, 1910:

> The most spectacular gambling was on the trains of the West and Southwest, and not so long ago at that.

His experiences were related in some detail, and told through an individual know as Pat Sheedy, a clever train gambler.

Sheedy was working the Nebraska trains with three confederates, using poker as their weapon of offense. They got word a man named Clarke was leaving Omaha for an extended Western trip. He was wealthy, carrying a good deal of cash with him. Happily, he was an avid card player, which set the stage perfectly for Sheedy and his gang.

A Paying Proposition

As soon as the train chuffed out of the station, the cheats started a small stake poker game, making a great deal of to-do to attract Clarke's attention. Clarke rose to the bait and watched the game for some time before asking to join them. Reluctantly, Sheedy and the others permitted Clarke to enter the game, but insisted the stakes be raised.

Of course, Clarke lost a little, then won more. He was the big winner after they had managed by ever increasing bets to get most of his bank roll out on the blanket. Then after a particularly heavy play, one of Sheedy's group jumped to his feet, threw down his cards, and accused Clarke of cheating! There was heated discussion, and one of the gang proceeded to search Clarke. He withdrew his hand, clutching a card hold—a small spring device for secreting a card until it is palmed into the game.

Now, Sheedy and the other two players threatened Clarke physically and orally, promising to expose him as a cheat unless all of their money was returned, in

addition to everything he had! Clarke paid, and Sheedy went his way, much richer. With variations, Sheedy worked this trick many a time on the railroad.

The confidence game would have been exposed at once if the suckers had possessed the moral courage to demand the arrest and investigation of everyone involved. But the same psychological quirk which made them pigeons, prompted them to pay up and let vultures loose to fleece others.

Grifting was not always accomplished in such a genteel manner. Physical violence quite often entered into separating the sucker from his bank roll. Sheedy and his crew, while working the trains out of Denver, collected thirty thousand dollars in a period of less than six months. Five thousand of this was secured by actually taking the money from suckers at gun point.

Principally Sheedy and the other gamblers trimmed their pigeons with marked cards, manipulation of decks, and hold-outs. This latter was a diabolical gadget which was sewed into the gambler's coat sleeve and worked on a cantilever principle. The hold-out retracted or delivered into the gambler's palm any desired card, even a complete deck for cold decking operations.

Cold decking consists of preparing a deck into a favorable arrangement, inserting it in the holdout, then switching it in at the propitious moment. The "H-Os," as they are called in the trade—oh yes, they are still available—will do everything but spit in the sucker's eye when handled by a skilled operator. All gamblers owned them or marked cards, or made use of both.

With profits such a sure thing, gamblers naturally flourished. As a matter of record, the Southwest was worked so heavily there were instances where the cheats came to blows or gun duels over possession of a certain sucker—while the sucker was so eager for action he stood by and waited the outcome, ready to lose his money to the winner. Failing to recognize brother craftsmen, many gamblers would try to "ring" in another to take his money by skill or force. They also regularly exposed each other to divert the sucker's money to their own use, and would hold up high stake games run by fellow gamblers, and take all the money available at gun point. There was little honor among this breed of thieves.

Tricks of the Trade

Sheedy was working alone on a Western train when he spotted a gambler working a couple of pigeons. The gambler was carefully riffling the deck while teasing the onlookers, "You shuffle and cut the cards, but I still can cut the ace of spades with one cut. I'll put up $500 that I can do it."

While the suckers hesitated, Sheedy stepped up and announced he would take half of the wager. Two others then covered the money; one thousand dollars was in the pot.

The gambler offered the deck. Sheedy took it, carefully riffled the deck several times, cut it, and handed the cards back to the gambler.

Smiling, the gambler withdrew a huge hunting knife from his coat and slashed it across the deck of cards. "There now!" he cried. "I have cut the ace of spades as agreed, haven't I? The money is mine."

The others nodded grimly, realizing they'd been had. But Sheedy stayed his hand, and said: "For now it appears that is true, stranger, but just for certain let's see you produce the ace of spades from that deck?"

The gambler confidently took one half of the deck and thumbed through it, looking for the ace. Puzzled, he went through the other half. Then frantically he repeated the process. He couldn't produce the ace. Sheedy was already on his way with his portion of the money and the ace he had palmed from the deck during the shuffle! The cheater had cheated the cheat!

Less violent in the outcome it brought

about, was a gadget often used by Sheedy while working with confederates. A poker game would be started aboard train. His confederates would watch, loudly exclaiming over the various hands being held. Soon bets on one player or another would be solicited among other bystanders attracted by the crowd and the noise. The hands would be manipulated from one player to another in the best way the most money from the kibitzers.

Sheedy recalled that individual bets went as high as $500, though the average would be twenty-five. With poker hands dealt at the rate of about thirty an hour, even twenty-five per hand wasn't too bad a profit. Bystanders would run out of money long before the players tired.

Sheedy's experiences working the railroads were many and various, several of which were concluded with a show of force by either the fleeced or the fleecing. But he philosophically observes in his literary contribution to gambling:

> In the old days any train that finished its trip into the West without having witnessed a gambling incident of one kind or another was a curiosity. Sometimes the spectacular element was missing, but the gambling, never. Anyway, being spectacular does not put money in the professional gambler's pocket, either on trains or off.
>
> The Western roads were gold mines in those days, and clever hand work aided and abetted by some bits of apparatus would reap a small monthly fortune for us.

Some of Sheedy's prosperity came through one of the oldest dodges: Two or four players would start a game of euchre (an old-time fine card gambling and pastime game.) After a few honest hands, the cards would be manipulated so that the victim would have three aces.

One of the cheats would casually remark: "I sure wish I was playing poker."

The pigeon usually would ask, "Why?"

"I think I've a pretty good hand here already, and if you'll let me discard two cards, I can beat any hand in the deck."

The pigeon, clutching his three aces, would almost always go for such a proposition. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll discard two of my cards, then bet you."

With the discards made, the betting would start. At showdown the cheat would come up with three hearts in a sequence, or some such partial straight flush hand, noting they beat three aces.

Gimmicks, Too

Similar, was another gimmick Sheedy used with a friendly game of euchre as the springboard. Here straights or flushes didn't count; four of a kind was the highest. After an hour of desultory playing, Sheedy would encourage some talk of playing poker, often remarking how good his hand would have been in that game instead of euchre. Finally, the sucker would be goaded to remark what a good hand he had held. (Sheedy had already thoughtfully arranged for the pigeon to have a fistful of cards.) A queen had been turned as Sheedy thoughtfully studied the sucker's request to make this particular hand a poker hand.

"Well, I'll play it if you'll let me draw that faced queen and exchange it for one of my cards," Sheedy would finally say.

"Sure, sure, go ahead," the sucker would chortle, looking again at his four kings. "Draw the queen, then we'll bet. I'll start off with fifty dollars."

"Call and raise one hundred."

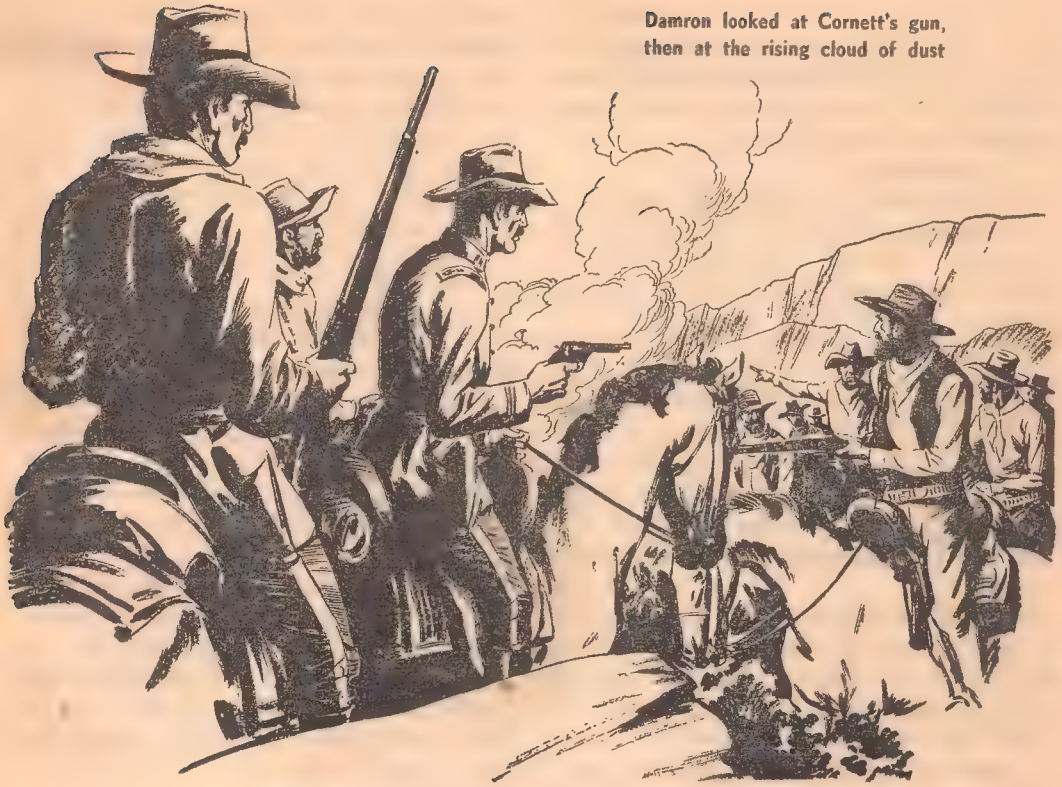
"Three hundred more," the pigeon would chirp happily.

Sheedy would raise a thousand. By now the sucker would be beginning to doubt, but ordinarily he would call.

"I'll call, and I have four kings, which wins the money."

Sheedy would study his cards for a moment, then push his hand away. "Nope, I win. I have all four of the aces," and he would spread them out.

"By hell, you have!" the poor sucker would admit breathlessly. "I lose." He would study the hands for a moment, then suddenly a thought would strike him. "But what in the hell did you want with that queen I let you draw?"



Damron looked at Cornett's gun, then at the rising cloud of dust

Hostage Trail

by FRED GROVE

OFF to the northwest, dust scuffed low on the brown, mesquite-dotted prairie. It kept growing rapidly and Captain Peter Hambrick Cornett, Sixth Cavalry, watched with the bleak attention of one who had learned to expect the worst in this unpredictable land.

Sergeant Barney Rudd, his square, homely face apologetic, was saying, "About the quartermaster stuff we're totin', sir. Corporal Jensen says the uniforms were loaded on at the last minute."

"Uniforms?" Cornett, only mildly interested, still eyed the dust.

"Yes, sir. Seems Fort Richardson needed tin wash tubs for officers' quarters. But Fort Sill got Richardson's tubs and Richardson got Sill's new C Troop uniforms. Now we're packin' the whole caboodle back so the C boys won't have to run around in their shirt tails."

"I see."

Captain Cornett could not be bluffed, but he could be beaten and badly

The distant amber cloud materialized into horsemen. Cornett narrowed his gaze, squinting, and afterward felt relieved when he recognized white men. Then he grew taut again as he saw sunlight glint on rifle barrels.

"Jensen says—"

"Never mind," Cornett said wearily.

"One more thing, sir." Rudd went on, hurrying. "It's old Eagle Heart. He's got another message for you. Claims he's put the war trail behind forever. From now on he follows the White Father's road. He admits he don't love the white man, but he will shake his hand. He's put away his lance and bow. He's gonna quit stealin' Texas horses. His heart is good—"

"What does he want?" Cornett cut in, remembering that yesterday the Comanche had complained of moldy bacon rations.

"I was comin' to that, sir. I've been around Injuns so long reckon I talk the same way—in circles." Rudd pursed his cracked lips a moment. "Well, it seems he wants you to make him a scout."

"Anything to get out of farming, huh?" The knot of riders veered sharply, setting a coarse that soon would cut across the line of march, and Cornett added, almost as an afterthought, "Well, tell him he'll have to take that up with the agent at Fort Sill."

Cornett hitched about, throwing the column a stiff size-up. His Conestoga wagons were creaking toward Red River in single file, twenty yards apart, ready to be corraled on short notice. His hostage Quohada Comanches—disconsolate bucks, squaws and children—rode skinny ponies and jammed the wagons. Cornett's handful of troopers hung on the flanks.

Ten men made a mighty thin escort through country often traveled by Comanche and Kiowa war parties helling out of the Nations, and Cornett would have questioned the prudence of his mission except that Major Braxton's two troops, on scout, were to join up. Yet that could mean anywhere within fifty miles, Cornett realized, depending on Braxton's whims.

With a scowl for the heat-hammered space around him, he halted the column. Captain Cornett was fifty-eight years old, two inches over six feet and he rode with a straight-backed erectness. Almost ten years ago in the Civil War he had been a brevet colonel, serving well but without fame. Long ago he had understood that his career would be marked by steady application to duty rather than the flamboyant dash that shot some officers to the top. Men like Braxton, who fancied buckskin jackets and bright bandanas and frequently wrote of their exploits for the eastern press. So Cornett had patiently accepted his routine lot, a lean, gray-mustached man who took such dirty details as this without complaint—and who still longed for the Green Ohio hills of his boyhood.

Now the riders came on in a fashion that warned him. They reined up several rods away, rifles across pommels. The dust settled and Cornett, walking his mount toward them, noticed some sat their horses awkwardly, like galled townsmen. Farm hands and cowman filled out the bunch.

One, man, tall and thick through the shoulders, came forward. Under his dust-covered hat, bright zealot's eyes peered out over a thicket of brown beard. His uncompromising glance dug at the column.

"Who's in charge here?"

Cornett flushed beneath his heavy tan, but answered evenly enough. "I am. Captain Cornett. Sixth Cavalry."

"My name's Damron," he said, as if Cornett should know. "Where are you headed?"

"Up from Fort Richardson to Fort Sill."

DAMRON'S unfriendly eyes locked again on the wagons. He squared one big-knuckled hand on his hip, and Cornett had a premonition of what was coming. "Reckon you ain't heard, Cap'n. Heathen Comanches raided around Lost Spring day before yesterday. They stole plenty of horses—shot up some folks. Feeling's running high."

Cornett winced visibly. "I regret to hear that, Mister Damron."

"I see you got some heathens along."

"These people weren't involved in your raid," the captain said distinctly. "They're hostages, captured some months ago on McClellan creek."

"Comanches, just the same. Heathens."

Cornett's mouth thinned. "As I told you—"

"Maybe you don't get it," Damron broke in, his voice brittle. "We're plumb wore out with Injun raids. We aim to stop 'em. And the army's no help, they're never around when there's trouble."

"You have a vast country to patrol, Mister Damron."

"Makes no difference." Damron cocked his head, indicating the horsemen. "Citizens have been forced to do their own fightin'. Town folks, farmers, cowmen and a heap more where they come from. We're organized. We can throw a hundred mounted men in the field. And we got ourselves a law for heathen Comanches and Kioways—we shoot them on sight. You understand plain English? Or don't damn Yankees get nothin' straight?"

There was a thick silence, then Cornett answered very quietly. "I trust you understand my position as I do yours. I have my orders. Of course, we have no intention of stopping in the vicinity of Lost Spring and stirring up the citizens. We'll pull right through."

"No, Cap'n," said Damron, with an old bitterness. "You don't go through here."

Cornett became aware that he was biting his mustache. As he considered Damron's inflexible face, a cold anger grew in him. Yet, even now, he could understand why these people ached to fight. He was conscious of detailed sounds. The creak of saddle leather as a man shifted nervously, a horse's snuffle, then someone coughed.

It was then that he discovered Rudd in the edge of his vision. He didn't recall seeing the sergeant ease up, but he had. He loomed two paces back to Cornett's right hand, steady as stone.

[Turn page]

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"We might detour," Cornett heard himself replying, striving for reason. "But the country's too rough east of here. West, it's dry as bone."

"You don't go no place, looks to me. Unless—" Damron let his meaning dangle.

Cornett's chin tilted. "Unless what, Mister Damron?"

"Just this. I'm a reasonable man. Hand over your Comanche bucks and we let you take the rest on."

A disgust filled Cornett. "And if I don't?"

"We take 'em anyway. That's how it is. The way of the ungodly shall perish. I told you our patience is worn out."

"You'd attack United States cavalry?"

"We don't want to unless you force us. But I never expected to see the day when the cavalry protected scurvy savages." Damron's burning eyes roved to the wagon train. "You look pretty scant to me. Don't reckon you could hold us off long."

"That," said Cornett, rising in his stirrups, "is an outcome you'd better not count on."

Damron leaned forward expectantly. "So you'll come ahead? Risk it?"

The riders stirred. One seemed to detach himself unwillingly. He bumped as he jogged. He was a slightly built man dressed in a baggy black suit, now gray with dust. His pointed, sun-reddened face showed the havoc of unaccustomed riding, and the heavy rifle looked cumbersome in his pale, storekeeper's hands.

"Now wait a minute," he began, giving them both his uncertain stare. "Damron, let's not rush into anything."

Damron tossed him his acrid scorn. "You volunteered to fight, didn't you, Appleby?"

"I suggest we give him time to consider."

"Time! We've palavered too long now."

"Give him till morning," Appleby insisted. "If he doesn't surrender the bucks by then, I give my solemn word the town boys will help you take them."

Damron seemed to weigh it this way and that. At last he said grudgingly, facing Cornett, "Like I said, I'm a reasonable man. Mornin' it is. You'll see, we want them bucks—we aim to hang every man." With that, he broke his horse away.

Erect, Captain Cornett watched them go. Some distance on, where the land rose to low, broken buttes, he saw several riders drop out. By that he knew that Damron was taking no chances of permitting the column to evade him. Cornett thought of dispatching a messenger to Fort Richardson, but decided the distance was too great. He thought of Major Braxton off after Indians he'd likely never encounter and realized he could never locate Braxton's command in time.

A surge of futile anger had its way in him. He allowed it to flare, and then said, "Corral for camp, Sergeant," and rode thoughtfully back.

SUNDOWN stroked the land in bold, crimson streaks. Purple shadows splashed the distant buttes where Damron's men watched. A breeze stirred, faintly cooling this parched emptiness. Twilight settled down. Around the mess fires, burning as yellow spires, the Comanches nursed their silent hatred of the white man. Horses stamped. Troopers grumbled, the men making blurred shapes in the dusk.

Captain Cornett, outside his tent, caught all these sights and murmurs and found them familiar, fitting a pattern he'd long lived by. When an orderly brought hardtack, bacon and coffee, he went inside and took his lonely supper under the sallow glow of candle light. Afterward, he stretched his stiff legs, feeling looseness come to his muscles. It was good not to move. Still in his camp chair, he lighted his stubby pipe and thoughtfully considered the course before him.

It had not changed, he knew. Once again appraising Damron's threat, he figured the man would attack. It was eye for an eye with Damron, the way of the frontier, no matter the guilt where Comanches were concerned. Thus, Cornett could either run or advance. Either way he risked trouble.

Suddenly he felt all the swarming pressure come solidly against him. For several

long moments he bent to it. Then he straightened and a doggedness took hold. He had another pipe and thought of his wife, waiting for him at Fort Sill, of his one soldier son somewhere in the barren Dakotas. At that, he got up and fumbled in his gear for a map.

He was going over it when Sergeant Rudd entered for evening orders and saluted.

"You know this country, Sergeant?"

"Pretty well, sir."

"Good. We're going to use our imaginations a bit. We can't bull our way out. Not strong enough for that. Besides, I want to avoid a fight."

Rudd's shaggy eyebrows lifted. "We're not turning tail?"

"Not exactly. Now listen. I want these mess fires kept low and steady tonight. Not too high, mind you. Just enough so a man can see from the buttes." Cornett checked himself with a pull at his mustache. "It will be dirty work, but grease every damned wagon axle. Also, I want blankets covering all wheel rims. Post double guards."

Rudd's gray eyes, almost white against his weathered skin, blinked rapidly. The captain found himself studying the man closely, with an unspoken liking. Rudd, who would finish his army days no higher than he now stood, was the kind of noncom who put backbone into a command. He knew Indians, he knew all the dodges of flagging troopers.

Movement at the tent door drew Cornett's eyes away. Rudd wheeled, then gave the captain an uncomfortable, wearying look. "It's Eagle Heart, sir. Guess he wants something."

Annoyance touched Cornett, but he said patiently, "Tell him to step in."

Rudd muttered and old Eagle Heart came noiselessly into the orange light. He was short and scrawny and naked from the waist up, with long, uncut hair and eyes which resembled polished beads embedded in the broad copper face. He showed a wrinkled, puckered expression, not unlike that of a recruit who had just

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downed a bitter dose of quinine.

He grunted, blending Comanche and Spanish, now and then thumping his chest. Cornett sensed an unmistakable defiance as the Comanche ceased speaking and stood back.

Rudd's face was very straight. "Eagle Heart thinks we don't savvy this scout business. Says maybe we figure he's afraid like a woman. He says if we'll mount him up like a pony soldier, he'll fight all the Tehannas tomorrow by himself. Out there on the prairie."

Cornett stared, controlling his own smile, his face fixed, inscrutable. He had learned one important rule in dealing with Indians: you never stepped on their dignity. "Explain," he said quietly, "that we know he's a mighty warrior. Therefore, it isn't necessary for him to prove how strong his heart is. Secondly, the pony soldiers are not at war with the Tehannas. Thank him for offering his services."

It was something to watch Rudd. He began speaking slowly and gesturing, his square hands surprisingly graceful and sure. He pointed at Eagle Heart and made the sign for brave, his left forearm flat in front of his chest, his right fist striking downward past the other clenched hand.

Eagle Heart listened raptly. He seemed to grow taller and Cornett saw his fighter's pride. Then, as Rudd finished and dropped his hands, a glimmer of disappointment entered the tobacco-colored face. Eagle Heart pinned a bewildered look upon Cornett.

Without any warning, he started hopping from side to side, swiftly weaving and ducking, aiming his hands like a gun. As quickly, he straightened and spoke again to Rudd. In a moment he vanished from the tent.

"Guess I savvied that," Cornett observed dryly. "He was demonstrating how wrong I was in turning him down, what a great warrior he is."

Sergeant Rudd scrubbed his chin. "That's part of it, sir. Only he put it in a different way. Says if we won't make him a pony soldier, then all he can do is show us how to dodge bullets like the Comanches. He thinks we ought to adopt the same tactics, instead of standing still, as he says, to be shot down like buffalo calves."

"He might have something at that." Dismissing it, Cornett returned to his map study. But the sergeant's tone made him glance up.

"Eagle Heart just doesn't understand. You see, sir, he knows these Texans want his hair. I told him at mess. He can't figure out why, when we need men, we treat him like a woman and won't let him fight."

STARTLED surprise made Cornett's normally level voice climb. "Have you forgotten they're hostages, being held in order to draw the other wild bands back to the reservation? Are you suggesting that I enlist them? It's ridiculous and dangerous. Why, only two months ago Eagle Heart was fighting Colonel Mackenzie on McLellan Creek. We might just as well wave red flags in front of these wrathy Texans."

"I see your point, sir, but the army uses Tonkawa scouts."

"Against Indians, yes. Kiowas and Comanches are their hereditary enemies."

"I reckon, though," said Rudd, carefully choosing his words, "you could take Eagle Heart's word if he gave it."

"Trust a Comanche?" Cornett's words ended the whole impossible thing. "Sergeant, I'm afraid you've served out west a little too long. It's clouding your judgment."

At eleven o'clock Captain Cornett quit his tent. He'd slept two hours, when his campaigner's ingrained sense of timing raised him at the proper time.

There wasn't much moon and the night lay sooty and formless, save where the fires still burned low. Cornett's frustration, which had assailed him earlier, was gone. He had a plan now. He would follow it as best he could, as he had always, doggedly to the end.

Sergeant Rudd's raw voice reached him from among the wagons. Cornett stepped across, seeing troopers grouped around a wheel.

"Sergeant Rudd."

He emerged out of the gloom, trailing horse and sweat smell. "We're windin' things up, sir."

"Good. We'll break camp now. Move south about two miles, then west. I plan to circle Lost Spring and come out north. Better get Eagle Heart's people stirring."

Cornett had hardly finished when Rudd was striding for the wagons. There followed some anxious moments as a half-wild team, harness dragging, tore loose from a drowsy teamster.

Before Cornett could take half a dozen bolting steps, a square shape shot across the camp ground. The team hauled up abruptly in a jangle of metal and leather. Then Cornett saw Rudd bringing them back, his thick arms hanging on the bits. His iron voice sledged through the murky light.

"Damnit, Brady! You're handlin' mules —not horses!"

There seemed no end to the hooking up, the milling and saddling, the dejected Indians shuffling like indistinct wraiths. Rudd hurried everybody. He seemed everywhere at once. Confusion ended and order came. Finally, they were stringing out, the white-topped wagons weaving. For another interval the sounds of the train in motion seemed overly loud to Cornett. But soon the noises settled into a creaking rhythm. They traveled as quietly as lumbering Conestogas could upon blanket-wrapped rims. Yet Cornett felt vaguely uneasy. It was almost too easy.

Past midnight, Captain Cornett sighted the firefly lights of Lost Spring blinking off to his right. He continued north, more by sense, by feel, wondering what new decision the morning might bring. A chill got into him; he buttoned up his blouse. Twice he ordered Rudd back and the sergeant's hoarse urging carried to him dimly.

"Close up! Close up!"

An hour later Rudd came up. He said, "Jensen heard horses runnin', they seemed close. He took a look but couldn't find a thing. No tracks or horse sign. Nothin'."

[Turn page]

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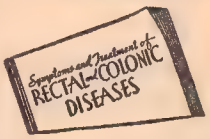

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Cornett's jaws clamped together. "Keep them closed up."

Around three o'clock Cornett halted the wagons. They rested briefly and went on. At four o'clock the captain, biting an unlighted pipe, saw the first streak of gray crack through the eastern blackness. He knew a dread, then, and there fell a weight across his shoulders. He stepped the column out faster. Once more Rudd prodded the laggards.

By degrees the blurred land came into outline. The light broadened. It was, thought Cornett, like a blanket being dipped off the naked wagons. Now, with full daylight upon them, he stopped the column and reined his horse. Rudd sided him, a questioning look on his face.

They were riding past the first wagons when Cornett said, "You take the point. I'm going back."

As Rudd turned, an Indian stepped out. It was Eagle Heart and he went straight to the sergeant. In the fresh light the Comanche's face appeared even more squeezed and shriveled, the skin stretched like ancient parchment. He grunted from his chest; his hands cut swift, fluid signs. There was a bright eagerness in the muddy eyes.

Rudd muttered in return and swung to leave, almost ducking.

Cornett, annoyed, said roughly, "Now what is it?"

"Why, nothing much, sir."

For once, Cornett's patience snapped. "What the hell does he want?"

"Sir," said Rudd, unwilling, "seems Eagle Heart had a dream. About a big fight with the Tehannas." Rudd swallowed, reluctant to go on. "He wants to ride with you, sir."

It happened too quickly for Cornett to voice his exasperation. A horse rushed up from the rear. And a certain cold knowing told Cornett, even before the trooper got out the words. "Riders, captain. Coming fast!"

Cornett accepted it without show, except for the knotted angling of his jaws. He said quietly to Rudd, "Corral the wagons at once. You stay here in charge. If they fire—you fire. Understand?" He was already gone, before Rudd could reply.

Cantering south with Corporal Jensen and four privates, Captain Cornett saw one solid wedge of horsemen driving toward him a thousand yards away. The sight fired a thrust of anger through him, which quickly turned to a black despair.

THE distance closed rapidly. A great drumming rolled over the prairie. After two-hundred yards Cornett slowed

Three Exciting Novels in the Spring Issue of Our Companion Magazine

TRIPLE WESTERN

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WAY OF THE MEEK by William Hopson

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to a steady trot. Farther on, Cornett could distinguish Damron's burly figure in advance of the sea of faces.

Then Cornett barked a command. The troopers jerked carbines from saddleboots, and Cornett folded back the holster flap of the .44 Dragoon revolver he wore butt forward. It was one of the worst moments of his career, certainly the most senseless. He had only one thought as he took his position and held up, and that was of the luckless men with him and the all but helpless wagons.

Damron boiled up in hard gallop. He raised his rifle and halted his men in close, making his gelding swerve. Appleby, the townsman, presented a bedraggled shape alongside him.

"Cap'n," called Damron, "you just about got away, but our night scouts spotted you."

"That was my intention, all right."

"You make it hard, Cap'n. I'm all worn out with you."

"I warn you once more," said Cornett, his severe voice distinct for them all to hear. "There are women and children in the wagons."

"You warn us when you give us no choice." Damron's eyes blazed.

"You give me none. I'm also warning you that Major Braxton will join us at any moment."

"We don't bluff." Damron slapped his rifle stock for emphasis, and his stare got glittery. "We're goin' in for them heathen bucks."

Behind him the mass of riders nudged forward.

Captain Cornett, who saw how it was going to be, said quietly, "Then you'll have to buy them," and drew his pistol.

Damron looked into the pointed muzzle, his mouth dropping open. In the next instant he caught himself and clenched his rifle.

"Don't!" yelled Cornett.

Something stayed Damron's hands, and Cornett said, "Drop the rifle."

Decision wrestled in Damron's unyielding face. His eyes ranged, almost pleading.

[Turn page]

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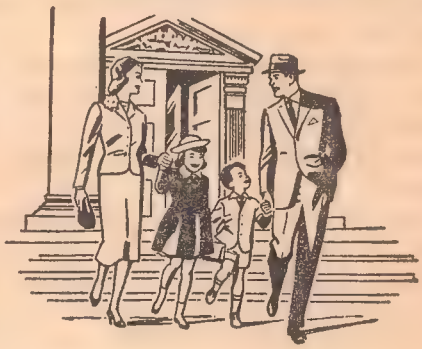

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"If one man make's a move you're dead," Cornett said. Still, he tensed for it to happen. He wondered why Damron's men did not act, then was aware of the troopers spaced to his flanks with carbines ready. Cornett said coldly, "You have three counts to drop that rifle. One . . ."

A struggle was going on inside Damron. His neck muscles stood out like corded rope.

"Two . . ."

Suddenly, Damron dropped his weapon. And as he did, he flung his furious wrath upon Appleby. His voice choked, "Damn you! You stand there—"

But Appleby wasn't noticing. He was gazing off toward the wagons. He said nervously, "Heap of dust back there," and heaved around at Damron. "Thought you said—"

Cornett discovered that he was sweating. Yet he dared not hope. It was too impossible. But he heard Corporal Jensen's impossible voice, almost a shout. "Looks like Major Braxton, sir! He's formin' to attack!"

For a long moment Cornett could not believe it. It was incredible. Now a tide of blessed relief swamped him. Good old Braxton!

"There it is," he told Damron. "Just as I warned you."

Damron looked grim, not budging, but he was watching, too.

It was Appleby who broke the tension. "You boys can fight the whole U.S. cavalry if you want to," he said in a sighing, giving-up way. "I'm heading for Lost Spring." He seemed glad to go as he turned back.

Several townsmen looked uncertainly at each other. In sudden unison they followed Appleby. Their movement became a magnet, drawing more horsemen. At length only a small stubborn knot of riders remained. They watched Damron.

"If I were you," Cornett said quietly behind his pistol, "I'd start them home before Braxton attacks."

Damron's will seemed to rise and fall. He glared once and sighed heavily in resignation. "Guess I know when I'm stumped. I'm a reasonable man."

He spurred his horse. The others swung slowly after him.

SERGEANT RUDD came out to meet the detail, and Cornett, feeling younger than he had in years, said cheerfully, "Well, old Braxton did it. Ride back and present him my respects."

But Rudd, who always followed orders to the letter, still lingered. Cornett let it pass for the moment and turned his grateful attention to the wagons, seeking Braxton. A man sat his horse in front of the formed troopers.

Cornett halted suddenly, his eyes wide. Somehow the line didn't look right. Sort of ragged. He flung around to Rudd.

"Sir," said Sergeant Rudd, his homely features a penitent red. "It looked bad for you. Remember the uniforms? Well—"

Captain Cornett jerked front with an exploding comprehension. He saw his own few men with carbines. But the others, the copper-faced, long-haired men in blue, carried sticks and singletrees from the wagons. And just beyond on his skinny pony sat old Eagle Heart, all but lost in his blouse. He pointed now. His hands moved swiftly, knotting.

"Sir," said Rudd. "It's for you."

"What in damnation?" asked Cornett.

"Why, sir, he made the sign for brave. He means you."

Half a day's march south of Red River, two over-tired troops approached the wagon train. At their head rode Major Braxton, debonair in fringed buckskin jacket, yellow bandanna and rakish hat. He waved boyishly and joined Cornett.

"Sorry you weren't with us, Pete," greeted Braxton, shaking hands. "We flushed some horse-stealing Kiowas. Had a lively run till they slipped us. Any trouble coming up?"

"Civilians delayed us near Lost Spring. Wanted our hostages. But nobody hurt."

Braxton smiled sympathetically. "More dull routine, eh?"

"Yes," said Captain Cornett, breathing deeply. "I guess you could call it that when you consider not a shot was fired."

SIXGUN PROMISE *(Concluded from page 74)*

his brother to look to his own interests."

Ira's face got red, his jaw was wobbly. Bob grinned at him. "Kate is in love with one Ira Numbskull Irby, and, Big Man, if you go off again without telling Kate you love her, I'm personal going to hit you in the jaw."

They pulled up before the Yancey house and Bob leaned over to take the reins of Ira's horse. "I'll see you, junior, you're on your own."

Ira grinned suddenly. He left the saddle and didn't bother to open the gate but went over it. Kate came to the door then darted down the steps into Ira's arms.

Bob Irby watched them for a minute, then grinning, he kicked his horses into motion.

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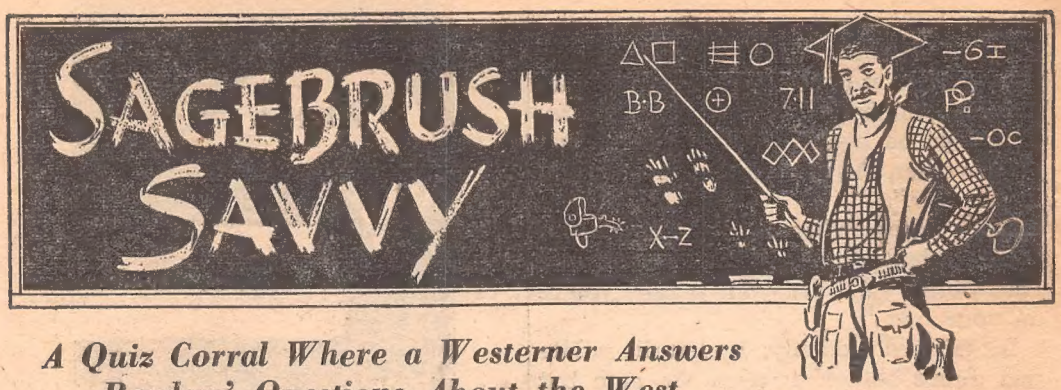

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Did Los Angeles, Calif., ever have another name?—R.T. (N.M.)

A.—No, but originally there was more of it, to wit: *El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Ángeles de la Porciúncula,* translated: The Settlement of the Queen of the Angels of the Small Allowance. "Small allowance" refers to a special indulgence granted in Franciscan convents each August 2nd.

Q.—Can you tell me how to make such old Western foods as hardtack and parched corn? Where could I buy an English-Spanish dictionary?—A.D.J. (N. Dak.).

A.—Hardtack was an Army ration, not a food prepared on the frontier nor commonly used outside the military. I can't tell you just how it was made, but I believe that baking a rolled-out dough of flour and water slowly and for a long time, until totally dehydrated, would produce a fair imitation, since hardtack was a rock-hard, unsalted, unleavened biscuit usually not over half an inch thick. Here in New Mexican rural homes, many natives make a thick pancake of wheat flour with little or no shortening, baking it to a leathery texture either on stove-top or in an oven. This is one type of *tortilla* (tore-TEEL-yah), and it will keep a long time, but not forever, like hardtack.

To parch corn, simply cook dry corn in an oven or skillet until thoroughly browned. Here in the Southwest we take fresh sweet corn at the stage called "in the milk," boil or roast it with the husks on, then strip back the husks and hang up to dry on the cob. Once well-cured, such corn will keep indefinitely and can be either parched or boiled, whole or cracked, for eating. This we call *chicos* (CHEE-cos). Jerky, from the Mexican-Indian word *charqui,* was a standard "hard ration" in the old West. This was lean beef, venison, buffalo or other red meat cut in thin strips and sun-dried to flinty hardness. It could be chewed raw if you had strong teeth and were in no hurry, but was also stewed or ground up and used like meal. Frontier scouts usually carried jerky in their pockets, and sometimes also hardtack obtained from Army commissaries.

Even the best Spanish dictionaries omit a great deal of cow-country Spanish, but my first choice would be the Appleton Dictionary, second the Velásquez. Any bookstore or your school librarian can order one for you, or for the Appleton book, write direct to Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 35 West 32nd St., New York, N.Y. I don't know the current price.

Q.—What ever happened to Sam Ketchum, brother of Black Jack Ketchum?—D.R.P. (Tex.).

A.—Sam Ketchum died July 24th, 1899 in the New Mexico Territorial Penitentiary at Santa Fe, from wounds received in the Turkey Creek Canyon battle between Hole-In-the-Wall outlaws and a posse led by Sheriff Ed Farr, who was killed in the fight. Black Jack Ketchum's real name was Tom. He was hanged at Clayton, N.M., his head severed from his body by the force of the fall.

—S. Omar Barker.

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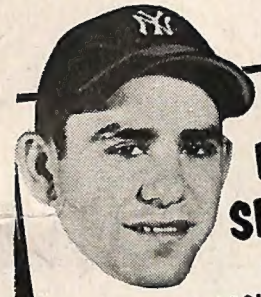

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